MĀDHYAMIKA ŚŪNYATĀ

A REAPPRAISAL

G. C. NAYAK

This volume is a reappraisal of the Mādhyamika thought with special reference to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. Mādhyamika philosophy, specially the *Mādhyamika Śūnyatā*, has been subjected to much misunderstanding and misinterpretation through the ages. *Śūnyatā* traditional has been mistaken either as void in a literal sense or even as the transcendent absolute in certain quarters because of the *Tattva* here being regarded as *Catuṣkoṭivinirmukta*. What this volume attempts at achieving is to arrive at an adequate understanding of the *Mādhyamika Śūnyatā*, as it is in its right perspective, by steering clear of the Scylla of nihilism on the one hand and the Charybdis of absolutism on the other. The author aims at giving a fair deal to what he considers to be a unique philosophical enterprise which has received an unfair treatment all along for no apparent fault of it own, and he has based his arguments on the original writings mainly of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti in support of his thesis.

The volume, thus evidently tackling, with a critical and fresh insight various issues associated with the understanding of the Mādhyamika thought in general and *Śūnyatā* in particular, not only makes significant contribution to the field but is also expected to provide stimulation for further fruitful research in this most interesting area of adventure with *Śūnyatā*.



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A Reappraisal



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Philosophical Enterprise with Special
Reference to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti

G.C. Nayak

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Dedication

This small work is dedicated, with reverence, to all my teachers (past and present) including my parents, the first and foremost teachers of all; to my wife who also taught me a few important lessons; to my revered spiritual guides and the spiritual Master; and last, but not the least, to the matchless world-teacher, 'Vadatāṃ Vara', who taught mahākaruṇā through his own example and teachings. To all those who, in a nutshell, put in a lot of love's hard labour for illumining the mind as well as the path of life in different ways, at different times.

Preface

If I may be permitted to indulge, at the outset, in a little excursion into my past for acknowledging some of my intellectual debts while speaking about my own background that has led to my recent preoccupation with the subject, particularly the Mādhyamika thought, I must admit that my interest in Buddhism and Vedānta goes as far back as my post-graduate days at Allahabad during 1955–56, when I was introduced to Buddhism mainly through the Vedāntic polemics as highlighted in the scholarly presentations of works such as Mukerjee's *Nature of Self* as well as in the works of Śaṅkara himself, e.g. in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* and the *Upaniṣad Bhāṣyas* which I had made a point in those days to study in original as a part of my daily duty, swādhyāya. At the same time, I also developed a keen interest in those days in an independent study of Buddhism as an important trend in Indian thought; the credit for this largely goes to my study of Hiriyanna's *Outlines* discussing in an inimitable style Buddhism along with its different schools with remarkable objectivity, impartiality, as well as clarity and also to my subsequent study of Murti's *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* and Stcherbatsky's *Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, works of seminal importance in the field.

Later, when I was preparing for the Buddha Jayanti Lectures to be delivered at the Gauhati Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1977 for which I was selected, I had the occasion to go through a number of Buddhist works,

in original, particularly Nāgārjuna's *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā* and Candrakīrti's commentary, *Prasannapadā*, in some detail. I was astounded to find, through my study of the original literatures in the subject, that Mādhyamika śūnyatā has been misinterpreted and misrepresented throughout and that it needed to be given at least a fair treatment which was long overdue.

My findings came out not only as the Buddha Jayanti lecture mentioned above but also subsequently in different forms in my articles published in *Philosophy East and West* and the *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research.* Śūnyatā, I found, is not void in a literal sense and it does not subscribe to a transcendent reality or any Absolutist Ontology either.

Mādhyamika philosophical enterprise is meant to give us illumination regarding the essencelessness of concepts as also of things; it is not meant to make us adhere to any metaphysical doctrine of śūnyatā. Śūnyatā, viewed as a doctrine or a theory (vāda), defeats its own purpose. As I went deeper into the subject with my growing interest, I became more and more convinced that even to do a semblance of justice to the Mādhyamika thought one has to get rid of preconceived doctrines such as nihilism, absolutism or any such "ism" for that matter and that the purport of the Mādhyamika dialectic also needs to be understood in the right perspective, not as mere vitaṇḍā or wrangling—an evident misinterpretation making it an easy target for the opponents. A thoroughgoing attack on essentialism and the dialectical method adopted by the Mādhyamikas to arrive at their conclusion makes this philosophical activity a unique enterprise in the whole history of human thought.

Moreover, master-minds like Nāgārjuna, it is to be noted, had great moral, religious and socio-cultural impact on their contemporary societies, and it was becoming more and more evident to me that it would not have been possible if the Mādhyamikas were mere wranglers or advocates of sheer void which would make nonsense of their own theory. Buddhist Mahākaruṇā in any case, about which Śāntideva is so very eloquent in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, could not fit into the framework of śūnyatā as void or of the Mādhyamika thinkers as mere wranglers. And at the same time the Mādhyamika thinkers were always eager to point out that they were not advocating any absolutist ontology either. The moral and the religious aspects thus stood in need of a harmonious interpretation in Mādhyamika's own terms in such a way that they should fit into their śūnyatā framework.

There was something seriously wrong in our approach to the Mādhyamika śūnyatā as void or even as an absolute, I was pretty sure, which needed to be rectified, and what pained me most was that a whole philosophical enterprise had received such an unfair treatment at our hands all along, for no apparent fault of its own. I was therefore in search of an opportunity to devote myself wholeheartedly to a thorough re-appraisal of the Mādhyamika thought by working out in greater detail, instead of confining myself merely to the writing of some articles here and there, so that a volume could be brought out highlighting all these aspects with greater clarity perhaps, in a larger canvas, as an interconnected whole. The opportunity came in the form of a senior fellowship kindly granted to me by the ICPR in the year 1996 for doing a thorough research on the subject, and the present book, I am happy to note, is an outcome of this latest research of mine on the subject, which also embodies my previous

findings to the extent they are relevant. I will feel amply rewarded if it gets due attention of the learned scholars, for whatever it is worth, at least to the extent to which it is an attempt at eradicating certain misconceptions in the field and being helpful in understanding the Mādhyamika enterprise, specially as it has come down to us through its eminent exponents like Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, in the right perspective. I will be only too glad to improve upon my present performance in future of course, if mistakes and misrepresentations, if any, in the present work itself are pointed out to me by the learned scholars. There is no end to learning from one's mistakes, which of course do not become so easily visible to one's own eyes.

I express my deep gratitude to the authorities of the ICPR both for granting me the Senior Fellowship for my latest research and also for undertaking the publication of this volume. My well-wishers and friends are many, who have positively either helped or encouraged me in different ways at different stages of my research, and although it is not possible to name them individually, to each of them I owe my heartfelt gratitude which I put on record here as a part of my sacred duty. I am particularly indebted to revered Professor D.P. Chattopadhyaya who has all along been a source of unfailing inspiration to me and also to Professor S.R. Bhatt for his constant encouragement for and during my research work. Professor R.C. Pradhan, the present member-secretary of the ICPR, has kindly taken keen interest in my work always and has encouraged me also from time to time while supervising the publication work of this volume, for which I express my sincere thanks and gratitude to him. Last, but not the least, my heartfelt thanks are due to Dr. Mercy Helen, the Director In-charge of the ICPR, for all the ungrudging

help given to me by her during my research as a senior fellow and also during the publication of this volume.

I am indebted to the authorities of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research who have made it possible for me to make what I consider to be an in-depth study of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti during these years and come to my own conclusions.

G.C. NAYAK
7.1.2001

Introduction

In trying to understand a particular philosophical enterprise like that of the Mādhyamika with special reference to Nāgārjuna and his commentator Candrakīrti, one gets beset at the outset, rather bewildered, by numerous problems. First of all, it becomes important to assess how far Nāgārjuna is true to the Buddhist tradition itself of which he is regarded, at least in some quarters, as one of the finest, rather the most important, the most faithful representative. But this in itself is beset with a difficulty that seems to be insuperable at the very outset, viz. that of understanding Buddha's own teaching without taking the help of any particular Buddhist sect. It is at least as difficult as trying to understand the purport of the Upaniṣads without taking the help of one of the Ācāryas. In the case of Buddha, however, there lies the additional and a much more intransigent difficulty in the fact that Buddha's teachings were codified only long after Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Moreover, there was a controversy that is well-known, which is continuing even now, regarding the proper understanding of Buddha's teachings, and also regarding the difference made by Buddha himself between his own teachings meant for the disciples in accordance with their calibre, which reminds us of the adhikāribheda doctrine (the doctrine of eligibility) in the orthodox Indian thought. Under such circumstances, any partisan attitude to these questions would not only betray one's ignorance, any decision also taken in favour of one attitude as against another

is likely to be arbitrary, unless of course some fresh and decisive evidence comes to light in this regard. The controversy between the Mahāyāna and the Sthaviravāda tradition that has been given the pejorative designation of Hīnayāna by the Mahāyānists because of certain happenings in the past are too well-known to be dilated here in a work mainly interested in assessing and reassessing the exact significance of the philosophical enterprise of the Mādhyamikas with special reference to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti belonging to the Mahāyāna tradition. Moreover, in the Mahāyāna tradition itself, the Yogācāra philosophers or Vijñānavādins are no less important and they no doubt deserve an independent treatment by themselves. And then there is the whole tradition of Bhāvaviveka *vis-à-vis* that of the prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas to which tradition Candrakīrti belongs. It is thus that Nāgārjuna's philosophy itself has been subjected to different interpretations at the hands of Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti. All this is certainly vast as well as bewildering, to say the least, and here I don't have any inclination whatsoever to take up all these controversies for treatment.

Each one of these representatives of Buddhist thought claims to be the most authentic follower of the Master's teachings—that is the most bewildering part of the whole issue. Then it becomes an easy, but not necessarily the right, way out to state that Buddha had elements of all such lines of thought in his teachings and then it becomes still easier either to praise the Buddha for his multi-dimensional approach or even to blame him for his ambiguity. All this has been done in the past and is even now being done by scholars. But how can one know with certainty Buddha's mind as it was in itself, unless of course fresh historical evidence is forthcoming, when it could not be known without any trace

of doubt by those who were much nearer to him in the time-scale at least? Even now there can at best be construction, reconstruction, and further reconstructions of Buddha's thought, as has been done in the past. Even this is true of venerable Mahākāśyapa whose silent discourse along with the mere display of a flower to the audience was supposed to give us the essence of Buddha's teachings. It is significant that he has been the forerunner of the Zen Buddhist thought which in the later days has been regarded as the best representative of Buddha's mind insofar as it is supposed to have been reconstructed properly and adequately in and through the Zen Buddhist technique. The point which I want to make here in this connection is that reconstruction in any case is inevitable. There has been a continuous development, it is true; sometimes the change is somewhat radical, sometimes it is not. But reconstruction of Buddha's teachings from time to time has been a regular feature from the very beginning. The doctrines of what is known as Early Buddhism are usually taken as Buddha's own teachings no doubt, but here again the prevalent view amongst the Mahāyānists is that Buddha had different types of audiences in his mind for whom he delivered different sermons at different times. In the words of Candrakīrti, "Vyādhyanurūpabhaiṣajyopasaṁhāravatte vineyajanānujighṛkṣayā yathānurūpaṃ dharmaṃ deśayanti."(1) Reconstruction cannot be ruled out altogether when one subscribes to the view that there were three sets of sermons given for three different sets of disciples or audiences, as per their spiritual eligibility or competence, so that some of the sermons are evidently meant for highly advanced disciples or audiences—the first sermon at Sarnath which was essentially realistic, the second sermon on the Gṛdhrakūṭa hills at Rājagṛha which preached

essencelessness or śūnyatā of all dharmas and the last sermon at Veśāli which was embodied in the essence of the latter-day Vijñānavāda idealism. But this is equally applicable, I suppose, to all those who consider the doctrines of early Buddhism to be the essential Buddhism reflecting the mind of Buddha himself and the Mahāyāna as a mere reconstruction. Here again, we can't say that one is a reconstruction out and out while the other is not. What about those later developments, moreover, within the fold of Buddhism itself—Zen Buddhism, for example, where even *Nirvāṇa* and *Bodhi* are said to be "mere dead stumps to tie your donkey to" (2) and the revelation that Buddha, the Vadatāṃ Vara (the best of the speakers), as he is regarded by Nāgārjuna, "did not pronounce even one syllable, that he has not spoken, nor does he speak, nor will he speak" (Tathāgatena ekamapyakṣaraṃ nodāhṛtaṃ na vyāhṛtaṃ nāpi pravyāharati nāpi pravyāhariṣyati) (3) to which Candrakīrti refers with an avowed approval in his *Prasannapadā*. Can we say with certainty that all this has absolutely no basis in Buddha's own teaching, that Buddha, the enlightened one himself did not provide the very platform on which all these different proliferations of thought could be made possible? Buddha, it seems, stood for a typical philosophical thinking in which the very tendency for its transcendence was not only immanent but was to an extent manifest too. I would, however, not like to enter here into the controversey regarding the relative merits of such reconstructions of Buddha's mind.

The neyārtha–nītārtha distinction referred to in the context of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti and others may be helpful for certain purposes within a context, but beyond this I don't think that it can be of any help. Śrāvaka Yāna does not consider Mahāyāna texts as Buddhavacana or Buddha's words;

in any case, they take Śrāvaka Piṭakas alone as Buddha's own teaching; all of which, therefore, fall in the category of nītārtha, while neyārtha–nītārtha distinction itself has a validity only within the context of Mahāyāna where, once again, there is a controversy between the Prāsangika Mādhyamikas, Svātantrika Mādhyamikas and Vijñānavādins regarding its exact application. The main reason why I point out these differences that seem to be so very fundamental to all these varieties of yānas *vis-à-vis* Buddha vacana or Buddha's own teaching is simply to show that the complicated network with which we are confronted here in Buddhism is not only vast but is also somewhat uniquely bewildering.

Under the circumstance, therefore, I have set a very limited target for myself, at least for the sake of clarity. My task here would be confined simply to an attempt at understanding the exact significance and implications of the Mādhyamika thought, with special reference to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, which I consider to be one of the most brilliant developments of Buddhist Philosophy for what it is worth. Nāgārjuna traces back all his philosophical ideas to Buddha's own teaching, as is done by all other followers of Buddha of course. But what would occupy my attention for the most part here is not the historical question of how far Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are faithful to the Buddha's own teaching (although such a question may come to be discussed by the way of course, which is inevitable), but the philosophically relevant question of what Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti were actually striving at through their philosophical enterprise which they have identified as Buddha's own teaching. I am not interested in the historical question but only in the philosophical assessment of the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, that is all. Historical considerations, wherever and to the

extent it would be relevant for clarifying the philosophical assessment, would, however, be taken resort to and is certainly not an anathema.

Buddha's teachings as they are presented to us by the Mādhyamika thinkers, in the form of philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti as well as of some others in the line like Śāntideva, the famous author of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, are my concern here and I don't find any reason why Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti or Śāntideva for that matter could be considered to be in any way less authentic in their reconstruction of Buddha's thought. But, as pointed out earlier, the relative merit of this philosophical reconstruction *vis-à-vis* the Theravāda or even Vijñānavāda doctrines is not my concern here, although I admit that this in itself could preoccupy a scholar's mind for a whole lifetime. I am only interested here to understand what these philosophers, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, were doing with their philosophy which had originated from the Master himself. That is, I am more interested here in the exact nature and implications of their philosophical enterprise.

True, thereby my task has been delimited to a certain extent and has been pin-pointed too, but I don't think that the task has been made quite easy for that matter. The reason lies in the varieties of interpretations, sometimes diametrically opposed to each other, hoisted on the philosophical enterprise of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti by scholars of the past and also in the present days. Such interpretations have been numerous, of course, and those who criticize others' interpretations are sometimes no more intelligible than the original writers on Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. The main problem lies of course in interpreting the Śūnyatā of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti who follows in the footsteps of Nāgārjuna,

of course. Void, supervoid, synthetic void, nihilism, absolute nihilism, no reality doctrine, the doctrine that everything is tucchha, alīka, all such views about the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna are as much prevalent even now as they were in the past in some form or the other. On the other hand, Nāgārjuna's philosophy has been interpreted with equal emphasis as a sort of philosophical absolutism which is not very much different from Advaita Vedānta, a no-view about Reality doctrine rather than a no-reality doctrine.

The task of a proper understanding and assessment of a philosophical enterprise that has occupied the attention of and has been subject to varieties of interpretations at the hands of great scholars of the past as well as present is Herculean indeed. Any so-called understanding could be a mere misunderstanding, of course. What to do? It is quite easy to toe any particular interpretation or even to part with all the varieties of accepted interpretations and take a stand of one's own simply to give one's approach an air of freshness. But this wouldn't be an understanding of the philosophical enterprise of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, but it would at best be one's own enterprise and at worst it would be sheer wild imagination on the part of the interpreter. Under the circumstances, I cannot assume any sanctity of my approach at the outset but I can only humbly submit that I have my own axe to grind as far as the Mādhyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are concerned, and that is neither in the nihilistic line nor in the Absolutistic line of thought with which we are already familiar in a number of ways. I consider the philosophical enterprise of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti to be a unique one consisting of enlightenment through a typical analysis of concepts culminating in the realization of the essencelessness (niḥsvabhāvatā) of all dharmas, of

everything and every concept for that matter leaving the conventional truth to take care of itself in its own sphere as loka saṁvṛti satya *vis-à-vis* paramārtha satya. It is neither nihilism or a theory of absolute void in a literal sense, nor is it Vedāntic absolutism in disguise. I don't find any justification either for subscribing to the view that Candrakīrti has transformed Mādhyamika thought to a sort of Vedānta, as some contemporary interpreters have tried to imagine, while Nāgārjuna remains faithful to the Mādhyamika tradition. Candrakīrti, I find, is a faithful commentator of Nāgārjuna's Kārikā elucidating the Prāsangika Mādhyamika stand but for whose commentary Nāgārjuna's purpose could not have been properly elucidated, which justifies indeed the title of his treatise, viz. *Prasannapadā*.

All this is going to preoccupy my thought in this treatise of my own where I am going to deal with these in greater details.

REFERENCES

1. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 18.8.
2. Cf. Hsuan Chien, a Zen Master, says, for example, "*Nirvāṇa* and *Bodhi* (enlightenment) are dead stumps to tie your donkey to. The twelve divisions of the scriptures are only lists of ghosts and sheets of paper fit to wipe the dust from your skin. And all your four merits and ten stages are mere ghosts lingering in their decaying graves. Can these have anything to do with your salvation?"
3. 'Ārya Tathāgata Guhya Sūtra' as quoted in Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 25.24.

CHAPTER 1

Śūnyatā—Avoiding Extremes of Nihilism and Absolutism

The title of this chapter speaks for itself and it is most important according to me if its implications are understood, rather comprehended, by one and all, and that too once and for all, so that no trace of further confusion may continue to be there. It is no doubt easier said than done, for confusion seems to have an intrinsic tenacity to persist at least in this context simply because our approach to this so-called Śūnyavāda is coloured by our prejudices that have their origin in our long and hoary as well as deep-rooted tradition. How else can one account for this misconception regarding the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti having a revival even in the modern times in different forms? It is really most unfortunate that ạ philosophical enterprise has been regarded as śunyavāda literally, i.e. as the doctrine of void, simply because of its use of the word śūnyatā which of course is not void, literally speaking, but only refers to the essencelessness of every concept and thing and also because normally we cannot conceive of a philosophical activity without putting it to one doctrinal pigeonhole (vāda) or the other. Mādhyamika doctrinelessness (Sarva dṛṣṭi-prahāṇa) is thus misconstrued as another doctrine (dṛṣṭi), a vāda, by us simply because of our deep-rooted prejudice (pūrvagraha). Śūnya, it is true, is somewhat (1) ubiquitous in Mādhyamika writings, but this śūnya is not void but it is used in a specific, a philosophically technical, sense by the Mādhyamikas as

essencelessness, having no self-existence, being destitute of self-being (niḥsvabhāvatā) which has its basis in pratītya samutpāda (2). Both Śūnya and Vāda thus are not only liable to mislead in this context, but they have also actually misled many.

First of all, I will take for examination the general contention of the Hindu orthodox thinkers that mādhyamika philosophy is out and out nihilistic. This contention seems to find some justification in the term 'Śūnya', literally meaning 'void', used by the Mādhyamikas and the negative dialectic of Nāgārjuna apparently smashing the entire conceptual scheme which we employ for communication with each other and also for the evaluation of the human conduct and the ideals for which we strive. Void seems to be the last word in Mādhyamika philosophy; everything including 'pratītya-samutpāda' and 'madhyamā pratipat' is identified with 'śūnya' or void as it is popularly understood. It is thus quite in the fitness of the situation that Ācārya Śaṅkara, the arch opponent of Buddhism, feels no scruple whatsoever in rejecting mādhyamika philosophy outright by declaring that such a doctrine which is invalidated by all means of valid knowledge is not even worthy of refutation (3). Madhva, another Ācārya of the Hindu tradition and a great opponent of Śaṅkara, takes Śaṅkara to task on the ground that Śaṅkara's 'Brahman' is as good as the 'Śūnya' of 'Śūnyavādins' (4), meaning thereby that Śaṅkara's Advaita philosophy is as a matter of fact indistinguishable from the void-doctrine or nihilism of Nāgārjuna. All these Ācāryas, howsoever opposed they may be to each other, have at least one point in common and it is that mādhyamika philosophy for all of them is nothing but nihilism or doctrine of void. And this conception of mādhyamika has come to prevail inspite of repeated warnings

by Nāgārjuna and his illustrious commentator Candrakīrti not to take Śūnya in its literal sense of void. Nāgārjuna, for example, explicitly points out that one should not call it 'śūnya' nor should one call it 'aśūnya', it is neither both nor neither; it is called 'śūnya' only for the purposes of communication (5). Āryadeva in his *Catuḥśataka* points out that this philosophy cannot be refuted even if one tries hard to refute it in as much as it has no thesis of its own, neither affirmative nor negative nor both (6). Similarly, Nāgārjuna in his *Vigraha Vyāvartanī* explains his stand thus: "If I have a thesis of my own to prove then I may commit mistakes. But I have none, therefore, I cannot be accused." (7) Candrakīrti in the course of his commentary on *Mūlamadhyama Kārikā* states that "the only result of our deduction is to repudiate the theory of our opponent. Our acceptance of the converse theory is not at all therewith implied. Our master, Nāgārjuna, when combating opposed opinions, has very often had recourse just to a deduction 'ad absurdum', without ever admitting positive counterpart." (8) Shortly before making this statement, he clearly points out "we have no theory of our own." (9) This Candrakīrti declares in the context of defending Buddhapālita's stand as against the stricture brought forward by Bhāvaviveka that the repudiation of a metaphysical, viz. Sāmkhya, theory necessarily involves the acceptance of an opposite theory. This should make it clear that mādhyamika, having no thesis of its own, cannot be regarded as a doctrine of void either. 'Śūnyatā' stands for a denial of all metaphysical constructions and it is therefore strange that this 'śūnyatā' in its turn be mis-represented as a metaphysical doctrine of void. Mādhyamika philosophy is out and out anti-metaphysical and anti-speculative in its character and whosoever converts 'Śūnyata' itself into a metaphysical

doctrine of nihilism or absolutism or anything of the sort is declared by Buddha to be incurable, says Nāgārjuna in one of his Kārikās. "Śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ, yeṣāṃ tu Śūnyatā dṛṣṭiḥ tānasādhyān vabhāṣire." (13.8) Candrakīrti while commenting on this kārikā refers to Buddha's instructions to Kāśyapa as follows: "O Kāśyapa, it would be better to entertain the substance view ('pudgala-dṛṣṭi') of the magnitude of mount Sumeru than to hug the śūnyatā view of the nihilist ('abhāvābhiniveśinaḥ'). I call him incurable who clings to śūnyatā itself as a theory. If a drug administered to a patient were to remove all his disorders but were to foul the stomach itself by remaining in it, would you call the patient cured? Even so, śūnyatā is an antidote to all dogmatic views, but if a man were to cling to it for ever as a view in itself, he is doomed." If one understands the significance of the above passage and the above kārikā, how can he commit the mistake of taking mādhyamika as a doctrine of void or śūnyavāda in the sense of nihilism?

In view of the above discussion, it is really astonishing that there has been a revival of and a swing in the direction of an absolutely nihilistic interpretation in connection with this philosophical enterprise in recent days. Harsh Narain, for example, points out that "the classics are nearer the truth about the Mādhyamika's position than the moderns. Philosophical śūnyavāda is a form of illusionism and nihilism: it is absolute ontological nihilism." (10) By "moderns" mentioned here, the author is evidently referring to those like T.R.V. Murti and others who have given an absolutistic interpretation of Śūnyatā. "The burden of this work", avers the author, "is to bring to light the modern mistakes of regarding śūnyavāda as an Absolutism and to throw into bold relief its real, nihilistic character." (11) Now let us examine the

following passage from Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* which should set at rest once and for all any such fresh attempt to rehabilitate nihilism in this connection. "Atraike paricodayanti—nāstikāviśiṣṭā mādhyamikāḥ, yasmāt kuśalākuśalaṃ karma kartāraṃ ca phalaṃ ca sarvaṃ ca lokaṃ bhāvasvabhāvaśūnyamiti brūvate—Naivaṃ, Kutaḥ? Pratītya samutpādavādino hi mādhyamikāḥ, hetu pratyayān prāpya pratītya samutpannatvāt sarvameva ihaloka paralokaṃ niḥsvabhāvaṃ varṇayanti. Yathāsvarūpa vādino naiva nāstikāḥ." (12) It is the essencelessness (niḥsvabhāvatā) of things which is the same as śūnyatā in mādhyamika philosophy, for what is denied is the svabhāva, the essence of things, and Mādhyamikas arrive at this on the basis of the Pratītyasamutpāda, which is most fundamental to Buddhism. There is no question of absolute void here. "Saṁvṛtyā Mādhyamikāḥ astitvenābhyupagamānna tulyatā (13), i.e. as things are acknowledged in the empirical plane, Mādhyamikas are not nāstikas," says Candrakīrti.

It is therefore strange when Harsh Narain, at another place, points out that "His (i.e. Mādhyamika) śūnya is comparable to the tuccha/alīka of Advaita Vedānta as also to Atyantābhāva of the Naiyāyika which are illustrated by the son of a barren woman, sky flower, and the like, so that śūnyavāda can be termed as *Alīka Vada* as well." (14) Absolute nihilism here is just a superstructure built in a sort of imaginative reconstruction of mādhyamika philosophy which has no basis in fact. Is the world a mere illusion for the Mādhyamikas? Yes, it is true that the mādhyamika philosopher has given the similes of 'dream', 'city of gandharvas' etc. to elucidate his point, as we find in Gauḍapāda's *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā*, but the point here is to show that all this is niḥsvabhāva, essenceless like 'dream', 'city of gandharvas' etc.; that is all. Nāgārjuna's

Kārikā and Candrakīrti's commentary on it would serve our purpose here. Nāgārjuna's Kārikā runs as follows: "Yathā māyā yathā svapno gandharva nagaraṃ yathā, tathotpāda tathā sthānaṃ tathā bhaṅga udāhṛtaṃ." (15) Now what has Candrakīrti to say about this kārikā? Here, it should be noted, Candrakīrti rightly emphasizes the non-existence in essence, i.e. essencelessness, of everything including dreams etc. "Yathā māyādayaḥ svabhāvenānutpannā avidyamānā māyādiśabdavācyā māyādivijñānagamyāśca lokasya, evametēpi lokaprasiddhimātreṇa utpādādayaḥ svabhāvena avidyamānā api Bhagavatā tathāvidha vineyaja-nānugrahacikīrṣuṇā nirdiṣṭā iti." They don't exist in essence (svabhāva); that is what is the most important point to be noted here. Mādhyamikas are neither nihilists nor are they illusionists in the ordinary sense, simply because Mādhyamika literature of Nāgārjuna at times takes resort to the similes of dream etc. to propound the essencelessness of things. Mere superficial resemblance in respect of similes given here or elsewhere does not prove anything. The point at issue needs to be noted and highlighted. As the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* rightly points out, "Yathā dṛṣṭaṃ, śrutaṃ, jñātaṃ naiveha pratiṣidhyate." (16) It is the svabhāva of things, permanent, intrinsic essence which is denied by the Mādhyamika. That "fire is hot" is not the moot point at all for the Mādhyamikas, says Candrakīrti; what is controverted is that heat is the svabhāva (permanent, intrinsic essence) of fire, that is all (17). I therefore submit that neither absolute nihilism nor absolute illusionism of some sort was in the mind of the Mādhyamika thinker when he declared everything to be śūnya. He was giving the demonstration of a typical philosophical activity leading to illumination through a typical analysis of concepts and therefore he was not indulging in any doctrine

or vāda either. It is therefore, according to me wrong to call the Mādhyamikas as Śūnyavādins, literally; they do not subscribe to any śūnya or void in a literal sense nor do they advocate any vāda or metaphysical doctrine for that matter.

If the mādhyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti is not a doctrine of void, could it be an Absolutism of some sort like the Advaita Brahmavāda of Śaṇkara? It is most unfortunate indeed to be misguided in construing an absolute nihilism out of the Śūnyatā philosophy. On the other hand, it is equally dangerous, and perhaps even more so, to regard mādhyamika enterprise as a form of monism or absolutism. Reacting against the nihilist interpretation of 'śunyatā', some modern thinkers have fallen into the opposite error taking it as an Absolute Reality whose characteristics are beyond the grasp of human intellect; 'śūnyatā' for them is an Absolute which is transcendent to thought categories, the implication being that such a transcendent reality does exist, according to Nāgārjuna, but we should desist from talking or theorizing about it. T.R.V. Murti, for example, in his *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* says that mādhyamika philosophy is actually a no-view about reality doctrine whereas it has been mistaken as a no-reality doctrine. "Śūnyatā", says Murti, "is negative only for thought, but in itself it is the non-relational knowledge of the Absolute." (18) C.D. Sharma similarly points out that according to the 'Śūnyavādin' "Reality is the Non-dual Absolute, Blissful and beyond intellect, where all plurality is merged." (19) Here it should be borne in mind that if Candrakīrti vehemently protests against the mādhyamikas being regarded as 'nāstikas' or nihilists, he is no less opposed to the idea of taking their philosophy as a doctrine of the affirmation of some Absolute or so. He clearly says that the mādhyamika

position transcends both affirmation and negation. If Nāgārjuna's critical philosophy is taken as affirming the existence of a transcendent Reality which is to be apprehended through a non-relational intuition, then his philosophy itself will fall into one of the four 'koṭis' or positions, viz. 'asti', 'nāsti', 'ubhaya' and 'anubhaya' which it so carefully and consistently tries to avoid. It would therefore be gross error to treat Nāgārjuna as an absolutist, a transcendentalist, a monist or as a propounder of any such 'ism' for that matter. Nāgārjuna's critical insight consists in a consistent denial of all 'isms' in philosophy and this is what is known as 'prajñāpāramitā' or wisdom *par excellence* in Mahāyāna literature; it is the same as the 'bodhi' or the enlightenment of Buddha. To accept it is to reject all sorts of assumptions about the existence of a transcendent Reality, not merely to reject all thought-constructions about it. An acceptance of the mādhyamika position therefore does not leave any scope for letting in a doctrine of absolutism, monism or some form of transcendental mysticism by the back door. Otherwise, the whole point of mādhyamika philosophy will be lost. It will come to be regarded, for no fault of its own, as another metaphysical theory believing in the existence of a transcendent Reality, and then all sorts of speculations about how this Reality is to be grasped, if not by the categories of thought, will begin to flourish at random. A philosophical insight which consistently tried to avoid all sorts of metaphysical speculations by pointing out that 'nirvāṇa' consists in the total annihilation of all kalpanās or thought-constructions (20) and speaks of 'Tathāgata' as one who is never engaged in thought-constructions (21) is reduced to the sad plight of becoming a victim of one such Kalpanā or thought-construction, and lo! the whole insight is lost in oblivion at once. As

in the case of the nihilistic interpretation examined earlier so also in this case of an absolutist or a trans-cendentalist approach to 'śūnyatā' one is reminded of the following warning of Nāgārjuna which has been so conveniently overlooked and even forgotten. "Vināśayati durdṛṣṭā śunyatā mandamedhasaṃ, sarpo yathā durgṛhīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā." (22) Just as a snake caught in a wrong manner by a dull-witted fellow only causes death to him or as a magic wrongly employed destroys the magician, so also 'Śūnyata' wrongly seen and understood only ruins the person concerned.

Śūnyatā philosophy of Nāgārjuna is critical philosophy *par excellence* and this should in no case be utilized for the purpose of establishing a metaphysical doctrine of the absolutistic, monistic, the transcendentalist or of any other type for that matter. Even to admit that there is a transcendental Reality which is beyond thought-constructions and is therefore indescribable is to subscribe to a metaphysical view which is not acceptable to Nāgārjuna. It would be rather more illuminating to describe mādhyamika as a no-reality view than to assume that Nāgārjuna believes in the existence of a transcendent Absolute. Those who are obsessed with the idea of a positive entity or a Reality on the ground or basis of which everything is declared to be 'Śūnya' are to be compared, says Candrakīrti in *Prasannapadā*, with those who, when told that they will get nothing, expect that 'nothing' will actually be given to them. "Yo na kiṅcidapi paṇyaṃ dāsyāmītyuktaḥ, sa ced dehi bhostadeva mahyaṃ na kiṁcinnāma-paṇyamiti brūyūt, sa kenopāyena śakyaḥ paṇyābhāvaṃ grāhayituṃ." A student of contemporary Western Philosophy would be reminded here of Wittgenstein's remarks about an imaginary expression, "I found Mr. Nobody

in the room" instead of the usual expression "I found nobody in the room." (23) On the other hand Nāgārjuna also does not subscribe to the view that void is the absolute truth or Reality. We are therefore to carefully steer clear between these two extremes so as to have a firm grasp on the mādhyamika philosophy. A Mādhyamika thinker, it should be borne in mind, has no metaphysical axe to grind.

Here it may be interesting to note that amalgamation of Śūnya with Brahman is not entirely novel to the Indian thought because of its typical tendency to comprehend all sorts in one big whole as it were. It is a prevalent feature of a number of later Upaniṣads, e.g. *Maitreyī* and *Tejobindu Upaniṣads*. "Antaḥ pūrṇo, bahiḥ purṇaḥ, pūrṇa kuṁbha ivāmbare, Antaḥ śūnyo, bahiḥ śūnyaḥ, śūnya kuṁbha ivāṁbare"; (2.27) these words of *Maitreyī Upaniṣad*, for example, put them together, while *Tejobindu Upaniṣad* speaks of "Śūnyātmā, sūkṣma rūpātmā, viśvātmā, viśva hīnakaḥ" (4.43). In Gauḍapāda's *Maṇḍūkya kārikā*, it becomes at times really difficult to decipher whether the author is speaking of Śūnya or the Brahman, because the same four-cornered logic is taken resort to here while the point of reference is evidently the Absolute or the Paramātman. "Astināstyastināstīti, nāstinastīti vāpunaḥ, Calasthirobhayābhāvairāvṛṇotyeva bālīśaḥ. Koṭyaścatasra etāstu grahairyāsāṃ sadā vṛtaḥ, Bhagavānābhiraspṛṣṭo, yena dṛṣṭaḥ sa sarvadṛk," says Gauḍapāda in *Mandūkyakārikā,* 4.83–84. It is significant that in the *Śūnya Saṁhitā* of Acyutānanda, one of the most prominent *Pancasakhā* philosophers of Orissa, we even come across the concept of *Śūnya Puruṣa*. Śūnyatā of Nāgārjuna is not to be confused, however, with a transcendent absolute of any sort nor is it to be taken as sheer void. In order to arrive at a clearer understanding of this point, we need to go into an

understanding in depth of the key concept of Pratītya samutpāda which forms the very basis of the Śūnyatā philosophy. This is proposed to be done in the sequel.

PRATĪTYA SAMUTPĀDA AND TATTVA

Nāgārjuna bows down to Buddha for having taught pratītya samutpāda which according to him is the same as śūnyatā and madhyamā pratipat (24). Pratītyasamutpāda is a central concept of Buddhism which has been subjected to various interpretations at the hands of Buddhist scholars. Whereas according to the Hīnayānist version it implies the causal law according to which the evanescent momentary things appear, mādhyamika philosophy gives an entirely different interpretation of this concept. Candrakīrti thus examining in detail rejects the Hīnayānist interpretation of pratītya samutpāda as 'pratipratirityānām vināśinām samutpāda' or appearance of evanescent momentary things and puts forth his own version as follows which he considers to be the most appropriate—"Hetupratyayāpekṣo bhāvānāmutpādaḥ pratītyasamutpādārthaḥ". Pratītya samutpāda does not imply a temporal sequence of the entities between which there is a causal relation; it points to the dependence of one concept on another. This interdependence of concepts is, according to Nāgārjuna, the same as the śūnyatā or niḥsvabhāvatā, i.e. essencelessness of all these concepts. If every concept is dependent on another for its intelligibility it cannot be said to have a fixed essence of its own. One who understands pratītyasamutpāda, i.e. the mutual dependence or parasparāpekṣā of concepts therefore understands that they are all śūnya or niḥsvabhāva, i.e. they do not have an independent and permanent essence of their own. This also is what Buddha

means by madhyamāpratipat in as much as the realization of śūnyatā steers clear between the extremes of metaphysical speculation about the svabhāva or fixed nature of things and makes one adopt a middle course amongst the contending metaphysical doctrines. And once this is realized there is no further scope for talking about the existence of a transcendent Absolute in Śūnyavāda, which strictly speaking is not a 'vāda' or 'ism' at all but is simply a model of philosophical activity leading to the critical insight into the nature and function of concepts which in its turn gives us nirvāṇa or freedom from all sorts of thought—constructions or kalpanā.

It should have been clear from the above discussion that pratītyasamutpāda taught by Buddha is itself the tattva, i.e. the exact or the real nature of the case for the mādhyamikas. Pratītyasamutpāda itself is described in negative terminology by Nāgārjuna as "anirodhamanutpādamanucchedamaśāśvataṃ, anekārthamanānārthamanāgamamanirgmaṃ". Pratītya samutpāda which is the same as śūnyatā being the tattva or the true significance of the concepts, one cannot again meaningfully talk of its origination, destruction etc. When this is realized there is freedom from essentialist thought-constructions and the cravings of the mind, and that is why the tattva is said to be "aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapancairaprapancitaṃ". All these descriptions are not applied here to an Absolute transcending thought; they are only the description of the state of affairs when one realizes the śūnyatā or niḥsvabhāvatā, i.e. the essencelessness of all our ideas or concepts. It is said to be bhūtapratyaveksā or perception of the real nature of the fact, i.e. niḥsvabhāvatā; here again there is no indication of the perception of a transcendent Reality. It is called 'tathatā' suchness or thusness, because it is the true state-of-affairs, or bhūta-tathatā, i.e. the

real nature of the case as it obtains. It is also called yathābhūta, i.e. the fact as it is, dharmāṇāṃ dharmatā or the inherent character of the dharmas and prakṛtirdharmāṇāṃ or the nature of the dharmas. This is said to be the tattva which does not lie in an Absolute outside or immanent in the phenomena. That there is no other reality apart from or independent of śūnyatā or niḥsvabhāvata, that everything here ultimately boils down to the realization of this truth alone, would be clear from the following passage of Candrakīrti: "Yadi khalu tadadhyāropād bhavadbhirastītyucyate, kīdṛśaṃ tat? Yā sā dharmāṇāṃ dharmatā nāma saiva tat-svarūpaṃ, atha keyaṃ dharmāṇāṃ dharmata? Dharmāṇāṃ svabhāvaḥ, prakṛtiḥ, Kā ceyaṃ prakṛtiḥ? Yeyaṃ Śūnyatā, keyaṃ śūnyatā? Naiḥsvābhāvyaṃ." (25)

REFERENCES

1. Cf. Nāgārjuna, *Vigraha vyāvartanī*, 23, "Tatra yo nirmitakaḥ puruṣaḥ pratiṣidhyate sōpi śūnyaḥ, yaḥ pratiṣedhayati sōpi śūnyaḥ, yo māyāpuruṣaḥ pratiṣidhyate sōpi śūnyaḥ, yah pratiṣedhayati sōpi śūnyaḥ."
2. Cf. *Ibid.* 22 "Iha hi yaḥ pratītya bhāvo bhāvānāṃ sā śūnyatā. Kasmāt? Niḥsvabhāvatvāt. Ye hi pratītyasamutpannā bhāvāste na satsvabhāvā bhavanti; svabhāvābhāvāt. Kasmāt? Hetupratyaya-sāpekṣatvāt."
3. Cf. *Brhma Sūtra Bhāṣya* 2.2.31. "Śūnyavādipakṣastu sarvapramāṇ-avipratiṣiddha iti tannirākaraṇāya nādaraḥ kriyate."
4. Cf. "Yat śūnyavādinaḥ śūnyaṃ tadeva Brahma māyinaḥ."
5. Cf. "Śūnyamiti na vaktavyamaśūnyamiti vā bhavet, ubhayaṃ nobhayaṃ ceti prajñaptyarthaṃ tu kathyate."
6. Cf. "Sadasat sadasacceti yasya pakṣo na vidyate, upālaṁbhaści-reṇāpi tasya vaktuṃ na śakyate," 16.25.
7. Cf. "Yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eva me bhaveddoṣaḥ, nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasamānnaivāsti me doṣaḥ."

8. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, "parapratijñā pratiṣedhamātraphalatvāt prasangāpādānasya nāsti prasangaviparītārthāpattiḥ, tathā ca ācāryo bhūyasā prasangāpattimukhenaiva parapakṣaṃ nirākaroti sma."
9. Cf. *Ibid.*, "Svapratijñāyā abhāvāt".
10. Harsh Narain, *The Mādhyamika Mind* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1997), Introduction, p.4.
11. *Ibid.*, p.3.
12. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 18.7.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Harsh Narain, *op. cit.* p.118.
15. Nāgārjuna, *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā* 7.34.
16. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra,* 9.26.
17. Cf. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā,* "Nanu ca gopālāṅganā jana prasiddhametad-Agnerauṣṇyaṃ svabhāva iti. Kiṁ khalu asmābhiruktaṃ na prasiddhamiti? Etatu vayaṃ brūmaḥ-Nāyaṃ svabhāva bhavitumarhati, svabhāva lakṣaṇa viyuktatvāt."
18. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, 1955), p.160, Cf. *Ibid.*, p.234, "The mādhyamika rejects every view as falsification of the real. The rejection is, however, a means, the only means open to absolutism."
19. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, p.94.
20. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, "Nirāvaśeṣa kalpanākṣayarūpameva nirvāṇaṃ," "sarvakalpanākṣaya rūpameva nirvāṇaṃ."
21. Cf. *Ibid.*, "Tatra tathāgato na kalpayati na vikalpayati, sarvakalpavikalpajāla vāsanāprapancavigato hi śāntamate tathāgataḥ."
22. *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, 24.11.
23. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books.*
24. Cf. *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, "Yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā."
25. *Prasannapadā.*

CHAPTER 2

The Significance of Mādhyamika Dialectic

Before entering into an examination of the exact significance of Mādhyamika Dialectic, it becomes incumbent on us to examine whether Nāgārjuna who has no thesis of his own, as per his own admission, could be regarded as a mere 'Vaitaṇḍika'? If he is not a nihilist nor an absolutist, if he is not interested in propounding any thesis of his own, and is only engaged in refuting others' theses, what exactly is he doing in that case?

In that case, why not regard Nāgārjuna as a 'Vaitaṇḍika' having no thesis of his own and being interested only in the refutation of the opponents' theses? 'Vitaṇḍā' is a technical term used in the Indian philosophical literature which is defined in the *Nyāya-sūtras* of Gautama as 'Sa (jalpaḥ) pratipakṣasthāpanāhīno vitaṇḍā', and 'jalpa' in its turn is defined as 'Vijagīṣu Kathā jalpaḥ' or 'Yathoktopapanna chhalajāti nigrahasthāna sādhanopalaṁbho jalpaḥ'. When two parties engage in discussion only for the purpose of victory and take resort to all sorts of unfair and logically fallacious means to achieve victory, it is called jalpa, and when being engaged in jalpa one only goes on refuting the opponents' view without establishing any conclusion of one's own, it is called vitaṇḍā. One who engages in vitaṇḍā is called vaitaṇḍika. Now, while examining the mādhyamika way of philosophizing, we are first of all to see whether they are only interested in victory over their opponents or whether

they have some other ulterior motive. If they have some other motive behind all that they do and if they are not simply wrangling with their opponents with a view to achieve an easy victory, then they cannot be regarded as vaitaṇḍikas even if they do not have a metaphysical thesis of their own. When we consider mādhyamika position from this angle we find that they simply did not want to wrangle with their opponents for the purpose of victory. Prajñā pāramitā or the highest wisdom which consists in a critical insight into the exact nature of concepts as they really are is the *summum bonum* or the highest end kept in view by the mādhyamikas throughout their philosophy. This highest wisdom is possible only in nirvāṇa and nirvāṇa cannot be attained unless the paramārtha satya or the ultimate truth as distinguished from the loka saṁvṛti satya or the truth that hides the ultimate truth is realized. But what is this ultimate truth or paramārtha satya? It is the exact significance of concepts as they are without any distortion which is nothing but śūnyatā, i.e. niḥsvabhāvatā or essencelessness; it is said to be the highest or the ultimate (parama) truth also in the sense that it is the best (uttama) to be realized (1). The proper understanding or comprehension of śūnyatā thus constitues the *summum bonum* or the highest end for the mādhyamikas which is the same as nirvāṇa. This proper understanding or comprehension of śūnyatā as the highest good or nirvāṇa is the message conveyed by Buddha to the suffering multitude, according to Nāgārjuna. It is described as "Sarvopalṁbhopaśamaḥ prapancopaśamaḥ śivaḥ" (2). The realization of śūnyatā results in the cessation of all essentialist thought-constructions and the consequent speech-activity. Being a state of the inapplicability of varieties of thought-constructions it is quiescence; it is śiva or the highest good, says Candrakīrti, as it

consists in the cessation of the speculative mind and the prolific linguistic habits thereof or because it puts an end to all kleśas, i.e. defiling force and all vāsanās or essentialist impulses (3). All these descriptions show that mādhyamika philosophy does point to a *summum bonum* which consists in the realization of what it regards to be paramārtha satya as distinguished from loka saṁvṛti satya. It can therefore by no stretch of imagination be construed as mere vitaṇḍā.

Nor is it proper to take Mādhyamikas to task, as some critics have done, for rejecting the rival theory or theories without giving any counter-theory of their own. Referring to the criticism of the Vaibhāṣika theory, Fukuhara, for example, says, "though this theory of Vaibhāṣikas contains many defects as pointed out by Vasubandhu, we should acknowledge that it was such a purposeful, religious theory. If the theory can be replaced with another faultless theory which fulfils the above necessities, as done by Vasubandhu, it is better. But simple rejection of the theory without giving any counter-theory, as done by Mādhyamikas, is not proper." (4) This, in my considered opinion, is due to a gross misunderstanding of the mādhyamika programme. Mādhyamikas were interested in pointing to Nirvāṇa which is devoid of all prapanca caused by the seeing of svabhāva where there is absolute niḥsvabhāvatā or śūnyatā. They were not interested in propounding any theory whatsoever about a Reality, much less "a purposeful, religious theory" in place of the Vaibhāṣikas, but by generating a critical insight into niḥsvabhāvatā through a criticism of all metaphysical theories, their intention was to point to a *summum bonum* which is free from thought-constructions. This *summum bonum* is nirvāṇa, according to them, when 'idaṃ satyābhiniveśa' (5), i.e. the dogmatic clinging to the effect that "this is the very

truth" completely ceases. In that case, how can there be a religious theory to be upheld by the Mādhyamikas? Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the *summum bonum* according to the Mādhyamikas does not consist in the realization of a transcendent Reality through a mystic trance or any other method for that matter. Philosophical wisdom or illumination consists in the understanding of the exact implications of the critical philosophy of śūnyatā which is devoid of all metaphysical speculations, and it will be a grave error indeed to suppose that this enlightenment consists in the realization of a metaphysical Absolute. The only truth to which Nāgārjuna points is that there is no metaphysical entity or reality hidden behind or above this world of ordinary discourse which is śūnya or niḥsvabhāva. The exact implications of this critical insight into 'śūnyatā' will be discussed in the sequel.

Nāgārjuna's intention in examining and denouncing one concept after another was to carry on a systematic criticism of human thought which would demonstrate the impossibility of metaphysical speculations. Language as a form of expression is alright for practical purposes and in its practical application, this is what is known as 'loka saṁvṛti satya', but when it is stretched beyond its legitimate limit and strain is put on it from metaphysical or speculative angles and a dogmatic standpoint it simply breaks down; it can no longer do its normal function. Nāgārjuna, for example, goes on examining various metaphysical theories of causation one after the other and finds each one of them to be untenable. So also he examines various concepts such as motion, substance, attributes, individual self, five skandhas, rāga and rakta, dhātus etc. and points out the internal inconsistency in these concepts when they are taken in their exclusive

metaphysical significance. The categories of thought, taken in an absolute sense, cannot stand the scrutiny of philosophical analysis although they may be alright from the practical standpoint. Sibajiban Bhattacharyya seems to have an appropriate insight in this connection when he points out, "Nāgārjuna's position is that all *philosophical theories* are nonsense, but he also shows that ordinary sentences, when interpreted philosophically, are also nonsensical (cf. his examination and rejection of 'it is moving'). If 'P', '~ P', 'P & ~ P' and 'P V ~ P' are all nonsense, they can be *rejected as nonsense,* this does not mean that their *negations* (truth-functional or otherwise) are true. This is why Nāgārjuna claims that his refutation of the philosophical theories of others is, again, not a philosophical theory." (6)

Moreover, if we want to pinpoint an exclusive or a definite meaning of these ideas, we fail to do so. We simply use them indiscriminately in our language but we cannot find any essence or 'svabhāva' in them which we can catch hold of. That is why all this is called 'saṁvṛti satya'. Candrakīrti in his *Prasannapadā* subscribes to some such view, "Saṁvṛtiḥ saṅketo loka vyavahārah, sa ca abhidhānābhidheya jñāna jñeyādilakṣaṇaḥ." All this is conventionally accepted by people, and that is all. Another meaning of 'saṁvṛti' is also given by Candrakīrti as follows: "Ajñānaṃ hi samantāt sarvapadārtha tattvā-vachhādanāt saṁvṛtirityucyate." Saṁvṛti is the same as ignorance which covers on all sides the true significance of our categories of understanding. 'Tattva', it may be noted here, does not refer to any transcendental Reality; it simply means the true or the real nature of our ordinary discourse. This is hidden by the conventional use of language. Language misleads us and creates a false picture in our minds of there being a fixed svabhāva or essence of

everything to which the concept is applied. Svabhāva, according to Candrakīrti, is what is unchangeable, uncreated and permanent and the assumption of such a svabhāva in the dharmas is what is vehemently criticized by the Mādhyamikas. When ignorance vanishes along with its consequent misleading picture of the essence of things, one realizes the tattva which is nothing other than śūnyatā or essencelessness. Nāgārjuna does not spare a single well-known concept; even the Tathāgata does not escape his onslaught. Both Tathāgata and the world are devoid of svabhāva or essence, i.e. a fixed nature of their own. "Tathāgato niḥsvabhāvo, niḥsvabhāvamidaṃ jagat." Nothing has a fixed nature of its own, not even 'Tathāgata', or to put the same idea in the contemporary philosophical terminology, concepts or words of our ordinary discourse do not have a rigidly fixed meaning or use, an immutable significance. Such a thorough-going attack on essentialism can find a parallel only in the vehement attack on Essentialism in contemporary western philosophy launched by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the famous trend-setter in philosophy of the twentieth century, although it will be well to remember at the same time that both the problem at hand and the procedure adopted by these two master-minds was far from being the same. Here it may be particularly illuminating to refer to Wittgenstein's remarks on a statement about Moses: "Has the name 'Moses' got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases? Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readings, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa?" (7)

While in this Mādhyamika attack on Essentialism the four-cornered dialectic is meant only to point to the absence of the permanent and independent nature of things (svabhāva),

it is indeed too much to read a sort of 'irrationalism' here in the Mādhyamika method, as has been done by Harsh Narain. "The Mādhyamika method," says Harsh Narain, "is to examine the various modes of being countenanced by commonsense and philosophies in general and to repudiate all of them by showing that they lack law, lack logic, and hence are a chaos rather than a cosmos. This is surely a chaotic or irrationalistic conception of reality." (8) It is strange that a philosophical enterprise that laid utmost emphasis on Pratītya samutpāda pointing to the interdependence of concepts (parasparāpekṣā) should be construed as a form of irrationalism and it is most unfortunate that Mādhyamika enterprise be mentioned alongside Omarkhayyam and Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa in the same context (9). Even the reason for Mādhyamika rejection of metaphysics is ascribed by the same author, viz. Harsh Narain, to Mādhyamika irrationalism. "The chaotic or irrationalistic conception of whatever be the case leads to outright rejection of metaphysics. All science, all metaphysics, proceeds on the tacit assumption that existence is law-governed at bottom and is amenable to reason and logic, which is the first casualty at the hands of the Mādhyamika," (10) says the author. Mādhyamika dialectic, which itself is a critique of different metaphysical theories of causation and of concepts like motion, substance, attributes, individual self etc. when they are taken in their exclusively absolutist and metaphysical significance, is thus misconstrued as giving us a chaotic, and irrationalistic view of things. A denial of permanent essence and a consequent rejection of essentialist metaphysics (that pervades our entire ordinary linguistic framework and our day-to-day transactions) while at the same time leaving our ordinary discourse to perform its task within the empirical plane without transgressing its

limits cannot by any stretch of imagination be construed as a sort of irrationalism. Philosophy, as Wittgenstein has remarked in another context, leaves everything as it is. It is only showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, that is all. In the present case, it is only getting rid of and helping others get rid of the essentialist delusion, the essentialist thought-construction. Mādhyamika dialectic helps us in getting rid of the delusion; there is no irrationalism involved here. Ichimura seems to be nearer the mark and to have a better understanding, insofar as he makes the following remarks regarding the Mādhyamika thought, "When an object of reference is perceived as having an independent nature (*svabhāva*) through a symbolic system, we call it empirically existent. When it is intuited as having a merely dependent nature (*pratītya-samutpāda*) because of casues and conditions (*hetupratyayatā*), we call it transcendentally non-existent (*śūnyatā*) by discounting the reality of the symbolic system. It is clear that the Mādhyamika dialectic does not repudiate the empirical world, and that what it repudiates or treats are two categories of underlying mental forces of linguistic behaviour and culture formation, namely, the referential force of the mind toward its objective reference and the tendentious or purposive force of the mind that links one symbol with another." (11) My only point of difference in this context would be to submit that when śūnyatā is realized, it is not that the reality of the symbolic system is discounted but that it is understood in its proper perspective, only as saṁvṛti satya, as loka vyavahāra, the conventional truth which is alright in its own sphere so long as there is no metaphysical transgression of the limits of our language through essentialist thought-construction. If we speak of the reality of something like the symbolic system being discounted, it would give an

impression of another transcendental reality superseding the earlier one and that would lead to further essentialist thought-construction of a transcendentalist metaphysics to which the Mādhyamikas don't subscribe in any form. The realization of śūnyatā as the paramārtha satya makes us understand things in their true perspective, as pratītya samutpanna and hence Śūnya (having no permanent essence) while having conventional utility of course. That is *Tathatā*.

REFERENCES

1. Cf. *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* by Prajñākaramati, "Parama uttamōrthaḥ paramārthaḥ, akṛtrimaṃ vasturūpaṃ, sarva dharmāṇāṃ niḥsvabhāvatā."
2. *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā*, 25.24.
3. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, "Iha hi sarveṣāṃ prapancānāṃ nimittānāṃ ya upaśamōpravṛttistannirvāṇaṃ. Sa eva copśamaḥ prakṛtyaivopa-śāntatvātśivaḥ. Vācāmapravṛttervā prapancopaśamascittasyā-pravṛtteḥ śivaḥ. Kleśānāmapravṛttyā vā janmanaḥ appravṛttyā śivaḥ. Kleśaprahāṇena vā prapancopaśamo niravaśeṣavāsanā prahāṇe śivaḥ" etc.
4. R. Fukuhara, "On svabhāvavāda", *Buddhist Studies in India* (ed.) R.C. Pandeya (Delhi, 1975), p. 90.
5. *Prasannapadā*.
6. S. Bhattacharyya, 'Some Unique Features of Buddhist Logic', First International Conference on Buddhism and National Cultures, New Delhi, Edited by Professor S.R. Bhatt, Department of Philosophy, Delhi University.
7. Cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, sect. 79. Here it may be worthwhile to point out that for both Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein, in their typical ways, it is the job of philosophy to cure the ills of the understanding. For Wittgenstein, "the philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness" and for Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti Śūnyatā is meant to cure us of our dogmatic views. The therapeutic imagery found in Candrakīrti, on his own admission, goes back to Buddha's teaching itself and, with all their significant differences, the therapeutic conception of

philosophy is also to be found predominantly in Wittgenstein. The therapy resorted to is of course different in different contexts despite similarities.

8. Harsh Narain, *The Mādhyamika Mind* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1997), p. 109.
9. Cf. *Ibid.* "Umar Khayyam stands out as a confirmed irrationalist in his *Rubaiyayat.* In India, leaving the ancient Lokāyata alone, about which we possess so little information, Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa is a Lokāyata of the eighth century with a clearly irrationalistic outlook on existence. To us, the Mādhyamika's position is unmistakable, so far as his philosophy goes. It is Nihilism, breathing a clearly irrationalistic spirit. According to it, there is no rhyme or reason for things to exist, wherefore they are essenceless, void."
10. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
11. Shohei Ichimura, '*The Madhyamaka and the Future*', article presented on 7 February, 1990 in Bangkok, Thailand, at the First International Conference 'Buddhism into the year 2000', hosted by the Dhammakaya Foundation.

CHAPTER 3

Saṁvṛti, Paramārtha, and Nirvāṇa

Mādhyamika does make a distinction between 'paramārtha satya' and 'loka saṁvṛtisatya' and lays utmost emphasis on the knowledge of their difference (1).

Now what exactly are we to make of the distinction between 'paramārtha satya' and 'loka saṁvṛtisatya', a distinction which is of utmost importance in their framework? "Those who do not know the distinction between these two truths," says Nāgārjuna, "cannot understand the deep significance of the teachings of Buddha." (2) This, it should be borne in mind, is not a distinction between a transcendental Reality and the world. 'Paramārtha' may mean the highest or the ultimate truth, the highest good, the final goal to be realized, but to describe it as an Absolute will be subscribing to an ontology of the Absolutistic type which would never be acceptable to Nāgārjuna. It will be committing a mistake against which Nāgārjuna has given a tough and thoroughgoing fight throughout his works. To dream of such an ontology where there is none of this is at best a daydream. The ultimate truth is that every concept is 'śūnya' in the sense of 'niḥsvabhāva' and when one is firmly entrenched in this truth he is said to have realized the 'paramārtha satya' as distinguished from 'loka saṁvṛtisatya', and that is all. That is why it is said to be tathatā, i.e. thusness or suchness. If anything beyond 'śūnyatā' is adhered to, it will itself amount to an incurable 'ism' which Buddha had taken so much pain to overthrow.

As all 'isms' are out of place here and as all thought-constructions are to be carefully avoided if one wants to be a true adherent to the Buddhist ideal, the highest good or the highest end for the enlightened one trained in philosophical wisdom lies in silence in the face of contending metaphysical theories, says Candrakīrti. 'Paramārtho hi āryāṇāṃ tūṣṇīṃ bhāvaḥ.' (3) Here again, silence itself has been described as 'paramārtha' or the highest good and therefore let not anyone think that here Candrakīrti refers to a Reality about which one can at best be silent. This mistake has been committed, however, by the most learned scholars of Buddhism. Stcherbatsky, for example, in his well-known treatise, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāna*, translates the above statement of Candrakīrti as follows: "About the absolute the saints remain silent." But it is really astonishing why and how Stcherbatsky smuggles in the concept of an Absolute in a context where it is entirely out of place. The question that is raised by the opponent in this context is 'Kiṁ khalu āryāṇāmupapattirnāsti." The Mādhyamikas insist that they do not have any assertion of their own, but how is it that, the opponent asks, you seem to make a definite assertion, viz. that entities arise neither out of themselves, nor out of something different, nor out of both nor at random and so on? "Na svato, nāpi parato, na dvābhyāṃ, nāpyahetutaḥ, utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvā kvacana kecana." To this the Mādhyamika replies as follows. This appears to be a definite assertion to the simple folks who try to understand it according to the arguments familiar to them, but not to the Āryas (4), or the enlightened ones, i.e. the philosophers. To this the opponent again raises the following objection. Is there no argumentation for the enlightened, i.e. do they not believe in argumentation? To this question the final answer is given

by Candrakīrti as follows. Who can say, whether they have arguments or not? For them the highest good lies in silence in the face of unending metaphysical controversies. Here the question was about arguments, definite assertion etc., the point at issue being the argument advanced by Nāgārjuna regarding the untenability of a number of contending essentialist conceptions of causality and the statement by Candrakīrti that it does not amount to a definite assertion. Hence, it is quite evident that the Absolute is not at issue nor does it come to the picture here until and unless one smuggles it in. The answer of Candrakīrti is simply meant to point out that silence is the highest end for a philosophically enlightened person. It has absolutely no implication that there is a Reality over and above this world which is to be realized through silence. One is again reminded here of the warning of Candrakīrti that if someone says that he has got nothing to sell, let it not be construed that this very 'nothing' or the absence of everything is going to be sold. Pears' observations in connection with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* on the impossibility of transgressing the boundary of factual discourse and the illusion created in the mind of the transgressor that perhaps there is some reality outside the discourse seems quite relevant here and may profitably serve as a reminder as well as a check to all those who would venture to posit a world of Reality over and above this world of ordinary discourse which is 'śūnya' in the sense of 'niḥsvabhāva' according to Nāgārjuna. "The logical space of factual discourse," says Pears, "is curved, and outside it there is a supervoid which is not even a matrix of possibilities. But the transgressor is a man who is never satisfied with this explanation. He always imagines that if he cannot cross the outer boundary, that must be because there is something on the

other side which stops him. His idea is that the necessity that he should stay within the boundary if he is going to produce factual sense, must have some sort of factual backing outside the boundary. He thinks that what creates the necessity must be something on the other side of the boundary which the philosopher ought to be able to describe to him. But the philosopher's point is that he cannot describe any such thing, because description belongs to factual discourse, and beyond its own outer boundary factual discourse must cease. So he can only tell the transgressor that the explanation of the necessity is to be found in what lies within the boundary." (5) Similarly, one may say that the justification for silence on the part of the philosophically enlightened person lies not in the inscrutable nature of some Absolute outside the world of our ordinary discourse; the explanation lies in the śūnyatā of the concepts which are only saṁvṛti satya or conventionally useful. A philosopher with critical insight of śūnyatā is non-committal with regard to contending metaphysical thought-constructions; this constitutes his 'tūṣṇīṁbhāva' or silence. As a matter of fact, here also there is nothing but a supervoid beyond the world of ordinary discourse. That is why, as pointed out earlier, Nāgārjuna emphatically declares that there is not even the slightest difference between the world and the nirvāṇa! In nirvāṇa one is not transmitted from one world to another transcendental order of reality, one does not cross the boundary of our concepts so as to have a vision of some non-conceptual Absolute. There is simply a dead stop to the essentialist thought-constructions which cause endless misery. One realizes the conventional to be conventional or saṁvṛti satya and no longer clings to it as having a fixed nature of its own, and that is the end of it. This is prajñāpāramitā and this also is nirvāṇa, but in order to arrive

at this understanding one has got to take the help of saṁvṛti satya. One cannot teach paramārtha, says Nāgārjuna, without taking recourse to the pragmatic truth. 'Vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate.' It is only through one's deepest acquaintance with and the comprehension of the ordinary discourse that one is able to understand the logic of the concepts as 'śūnya'. And again, it is only when we understand perfectly the logic of the 'śūnyatā' of the concepts and how concepts do not have fixed essence of their own that we come to realize nirvāṇa which is 'sarvakalpanā kṣayarūpa' or 'prapancopaśama'. That is why, Nāgārjuna says, "Paramārthamanāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate." Being firmly entrenched in 'śūnyatā' and realizing that language has only a conventional use, an ārya or a philosopher regards silence or non-committal as the highest good or paramārtha. And the attainment of paramārtha in this sense, not in the sense of a transcendental Reality, constitutes an essential feature of nirvāṇa.

The tūṣṇīṁbhāva (silence) of the Āryas mentioned in *Prasannapadā* therefore is to be meticulously distinguished from the silence so loudly spoken about in the Vedāntic literature. Take the case of the dialogue between Bāḍhva and Bāskali, for example, which has been highlighted by Ācārya Śaṅkara himself. Bāḍhva, keeping persistently silent over (tūṣṇīṃ babhūva) the question asked by Bāskali regarding the ultimate Reality and being pressed for an answer, finally pointed out to Bāskali that the 'Ātman is silence' (upaśāntōyaṃ Ātmā) (6). This may remind us of Candrakīrti's remarks regarding tūṣṇīṁbhāva or silence being the paramārtha or the *summum bonum.* The resemblance, however, is superficial insofar as in the case of Vedānta, there is an obvious ontic reference to a transcendent Reality, Ātman

or Brahman about whom it is remarked that words are inadequate in that context, whereas here in the Mādhyamika literature it is a reference to the highest good and the ultimate truth lying in the avoidance of all commitments to contending metaphysical thought-construction, sarva kalpanā kṣaya, in the words of Candrakīrti. Similarly, it should be noted that the Vedāntic 'Neti, Neti' (7) (not this, not this), or 'Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha' (8) (that from whom speech along with mind returns without grasping) or 'aśabdamasparśamarūpamavyayaṃ' (that which is devoid of speech, touch, colours etc.)—all these have obvious ontic reference to Ātman/Brahman which is totally absent in the Mādhyamika philosophy. Paramārtha here in Mādhyamika context does not refer to any transcendent Reality but to the ultimate truth, the highest good, the *summum bonum*—this point must never be lost sight of under any circumstance.

The attainment of paramārtha, the *summum bonum*, in a specific sense only as indicated above, not in the sense of attaining or realizing a transcendent Reality, constitutes an essential feature of nirvāṇa. It is only when one realizes the śūnyatā or essencelessness of the concepts and things, when one understands how concepts do not have any fixed immutable essence or svabhāva of their own, that one comes to realize nirvāṇa in the Mādhyamika framework, nirvāṇa that is characterized as 'sarvakalpanā kṣaya rūpa' and 'prapancopaśama'.

What then are the various implications of this nirvāṇa which is free from all thought-constructions? Freedom from all sorts of metaphysical vagaries is the ideal set before us by the Mādhyamikas. One concept leads us to another, one idea leads to the other, and this is alright in its sphere. But metaphysicians make an illegitimate use of and a rigidly

exclusive demand on these concepts, thereby falling into the trap of confusion and inconsistencies. Philosophical insight consists in avoiding these extreme metaphysical positions through an understanding of these concepts as 'śunya' or 'niḥsvabhāva'. The philosopher, like a good shepherd, checks the metaphysical vagaries from taking the upper hand. That all sorts of metaphysical speculations are to be consistently avoided is clear from the following statement of Buddha— 'Astīti nāstīti ca kalpanāvatāmevaṃ carantāna na duḥkha śāmyati', i.e. those who speculate about existence and non-existence will never realize the cessation of suffering. Commenting on this Candrakīrti enumerates all sorts of contending metaphysical theories available in his time, e.g., those of Jaimini, Kaṇāda, Kapila, the Vaibhāṣikas, the Sautrāntikas and the Yogācāras etc. which, according to him, are not conducive to the cessation of misery (9). This shows that freedom from contending metaphysical theories is one of the significant features of 'nirvāṇa' or philosophical enlightenment here. But this is possible through a realization that there is no essence to hang upon or to cling to in our ordinary discourse which is merely conventionally useful. Once this dawns upon the philosopher, he desists from committing those errors which an essentialist or a 'svabhāvavādi' is likely to commit. He, for example, would not side with any of the opposing theories of śāśvatavāda, ucchedavāda, niyativāda, ahetuvāda, viṣamahetuvāda, akriyavāda, nāstikavāda and the like. An essentialist becomes an easy prey to such metaphysical vagaries. Considering the things of the world to have fixed 'svabhāva' or nature of their own, they are misled by metaphysical pictures of reality. Rival pictures then hold sway on their minds which keep them in bondage as it were. 'A picture held us captive,'

(10) we may also say here with Wittgenstein, remembering however all the time that Nāgārjuna's approach to this problem is not the same as that of Wittgenstein. Prajñā consists in freedom from this captivity or bondage of essentialist picture-thinking ('sarvakalpanākṣayarūpa'), and that is all. There can be no question here of applying concepts like 'is' or 'is not' to 'nirvāṇa' itself in as much as that would again be committing an essentialist mistake. In this very sense there is no 'nirvāṇa' as a positive entity, says Candrakīrti. If someone thinks that 'nirvāṇa' is an entity or a positive state which can be obtained as one would obtain oil out of oilseed or butter out of milk he is mistaken, according to Candrakīrti (11).

Nirvāṇa is thus non-different from critical insight *par excellence* which is free from all essentialist picture-thinking. This I consider to be the unique contribution of the Buddhist thought in general and Mādhyamika philosophy in particular to world-philosophy. Buddha fought consistently throughout against such picture-thinking because of which he remained silent over a number of questions regarding transcendental reality. Buddha's silence has been variously misunderstood and misinterpreted as a sign of ignorance, scepticism, agnosticism, or a lack of concern for metaphysical issues and so on. But as a matter of fact, it was nothing if not a consistent effort on his part to avoid all sorts of thought-constructions. Buddha is said to have adopted a middle course, a madhyamāpratipat, avoiding the extremes of metaphysical positions. Candrakīrti also, true to this central idea of Buddha, lays emphasis on silence or tūṣṇīṁbhāva as the paramārtha. But it is not the silence of ignorance or of scepticism; it is the silence or a retreat from commitment on account of prajñā or critical insight into the logical behaviour of concepts as

śūnya or niḥsvabhāva. It is not mere 'prajñā', it is 'prajñā' or insight *par excellence* (prajñā pāramitā), according to the Mādhyamikas. In respect of anti-essentialism as well as retreat from commitment of metaphysical thought-constructions, there is a definite link between Early Buddhism and Later Buddhism which transcends the controversies amongst different schools, and here I have tried to highlight only those aspects of Buddhist thought. The practical implication of subscribing to the śūnyatā cannot be demonstrated of course in the same way as theories in science. Its impact, however, cannot be denied altogether. One can anticipate that there will be little inclination for indulging in a rigidly self-centred existence arising out of a desperate clinging to immutable essences on the part of one, be it an individual or a nation, who would subscribe to the śūnyatā philosophy with some seriousness, not to speak of one who has realized the truth of 'śūnyatā' in 'nirvāṇa', i.e. has been firmly entrenched in this understanding.

Convictions, it is true, can lend colour and charm to our lives and are useful so far as they go; it is only when they are intolerantly adhered to in an authoritative manner as absolute and unchangeable truths, that they turn out to be dogmas, delude and create problems for us. The most important contribution of Buddhism to the world of thought lies in its exhortation to get rid of dogmas of all sorts including those that might arise due to our adherence to 'isms', even to Buddhism viewed as an 'ism' or *śūnyatā* as a view (*dṛṣṭi*) with anti-essentialist bias.

Theoretically speaking, Mādhyamika thought will remain as a towering specimen of critical philosophy *par excellence* devoid of essentialist picture-thinking and metaphysical commitment. Practical implications apart, freedom from an

all-pervasive essentialist illusion is itself an important achievement of a high order of which the human mind is capable and which is worth having for its own sake. This anti-essentialist trend of the Mādhyamika thought is likely to face severe opposition, however, from the direction of both commonsense and scientific findings on account of our misunderstanding. I do not think that it poses any real difficulty for the Mādhyamika enterprise; this, however, needs a somewhat elaborate treatment before it is disposed of only as an apparent threat and not a real one.

Both commonsense and science acquaint us with what appear to be fixed essences; as a matter of fact, our whole transaction in day-to-day existence is based on the assumption that things have stable properties. Recent biological discoveries, for example, far from confirming the thesis of essencelessness, seem to favour an opposite thesis. Much of the similarity between organisms related by descent, we are told (12), is due to their possessing similar inherited material, i.e. a complex and diverse material that gives rise to accurate copies of itself, units of which are passed from parent to offspring which is very stable in its properties, and which profoundly influences every aspect of the organism containing it. Each individual starts life with a set of this material received from its parent or parents. During subsequent growth (in a multicellular organism) or reproduction (when the organism is not multicellular) the material is duplicated repeatedly with great exactness of copying (the process of replication); it influences the characteristics developed by the individual bearing it, so that similarity between related organisms results; and a set is handed on to each of the individual's progeny. One of the great biological discoveries of this century is that the material of inheritance, the genetic

information, is deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). Is it not a piece of evidence in favour of stability rather than essencelessness?

Now it should be pointed out that a philosophical enterprise or activity such as that of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti is not affected either by commonsense findings or any scientific discovery for that matter, for all these are here taken care of by concepts like lokasaṁvṛti satya. Stability, as conceived in commonsense or scientific findings, is not denied out of existence by the śūnyatā or niḥsvabhāvatā philosophy of Nāgārjuna. What is denied is the ontology of immutably fixed and independent metaphysical essences of things as well as concepts, leaving our day-to-day transactions unaffected. This point has been brought deliberately into discussion here just to clarify the exact import of the philosopher's activity *vis-à-vis* that of a common man or a scientist. It is the svabhāvavāda, the metaphysical doctrine of essences, which is under fire at the hands of the Mādhyamikas, not the working stability of the commonsense or as it figures in scientific enquires.[13]

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1. Cf. "Dve satye samupāśritya Buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā, loka saṁvṛti satyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ."
2. Cf. "Yēnayorna vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayordvayoḥ, te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gaṁbhīraṃ Buddha śāsane." *Mūla Madhyamakārikā*, 24. 9.
3. *Prasannapadā.*
4. Cf. *Ibid.* "Lokasya svaprasiddhyaivopapattyā, nāryāṇāṃ."
5. David Pears, *Wittgenstein* (Fontana/Collins, 1971), pp. 101, 102.
6. Cf. Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtra Bhasya*, 3.2.17.
7. *Bṛhadaranyaka Up.*, 4.4.22.
8. *Kena Up.* 2.4.1.

9. Cf. *Prasannapadā* on *Mūla Mādhyamakārikā*, 25.3, "Astīti bhāvasadbhāva kalpanāvatāṃ Jaiminīykāṇādakāpilādīnāṃ Vaibhāṣika paryantānāṃ. Nāstītica kalpanāvatāṃ nāstikānāmapāyagatiniṣṭhānāṃ. Tadaneyṣāṃ ca atītānāgata saṁsthānām vijñapti viprayuktasaṁskārāṇāṃ, nāsti vādināṃ tadanyadastivādināṃ, parikalpitasvabhāvasya nāstivādinām, paratantrapariniṣpanna-svabhāvayorastivādināṃ, evamastināst-ivadināmevaṃ caratāṃ na duḥkhaṃ saṁsāraḥ śāmyatīti."
10. *Philosophical Investigations,* sect. 115.
11. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, "Tadime bhagavan mohapurusā ye svākhyāte dharma vinaye pravrajya tīrthikadṛṣṭau nipatitā nirvāṇaṃ bhāvataḥ paryeṣante, tadyathā-tilebhyastailaṃ kṣīrāt sarpiḥ." 25.24.
12. Cf. *The Penguin Dictionary of Biology,* Seventh edn., pp. 123–4.
13. Cf. *Śunyatā Saptatiḥ*, 69, "Lokavartanamāśritya sarvaṃ nānā yathārtataḥ", and also 71, "Idaṃ pratītya cāstīdaṃ na rodho lokapaddhateḥ".

CHAPTER 4

The Problem of Morality and Religion in the Mādhyamika Framework—Śūnyatā and Mahākaruṇā

Here I propose to take up for discussion the general question of the compatibility of Śūnyatā philosophy with morality and religion. Those who would identify śūnyatā with void and Śūnyatā philosophy as a form of nihilism would be in a fix and would be simply confounded to find that Nāgārjuna, the illustrious exponent of this philosophy, was engaged in great religious activities also during his lifetime. As K.S. Murty has pointed out, "he seems to have participated in Mahāyāna religious life consisting of the worship of the Buddha, adoration of the Bodhisattvas, and the circumambulation (abhipradakshina) as well as the making of obeisance and offerings to stūpas. He inspired the building of many temples, provided protection to the holy spot at Buddha Gaya against erosion by the Niranjanā river, had the Bodhi tree and temple there surrounded with a stone edifice having ornamental lattices (vajragavakshas), and got the stūpa at Dhānyakaṭaka (Amarāvatī in Guntur district) enclosed with a railing. This last was a great artistic achievement. He was probably a devotee of Amitābha, one of the celestial Buddhas, to the development of whose cult he appears to have contributed. Jamyanbzadpa (c. AD 1800) in *Grubmtha* says that it was Bodhisattva Manjusri who inspired Nāgārjuna to develop Mādhyamika philosophy. Through dhyāna (Buddhist

meditational technique) he ascended the spiritual summit, while his mystical attainments, great insight (prajñā) and universal compassion (karuṇā) made all recognize him as a Bodhisattva."(1)

How are we to reconcile Nāgārjuna's śūnyatā philosophy with the above account of his life and works? The question is quite important and Nāgārjuna himself has given some hints in this regard in his *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā*. While discussing, rather examining, four noble truths in *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā*, 24, Nāgārjuna considers certain obvious objections that might be raised against his enterprise and points out that the problem becomes insuperable only if śūnyatā or pratītyasamutpāda is not properly understood and resorted to. "Sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate, sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyaṃ yasya na yujyate," says Nāgārjuna (2). Everything is consistent for one for whom essencelessness is proper while everything becomes inconsistent for one for whom essencelessness is not proper. It comes out so very clearly also in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī* with his own commentary, where Nāgārjuna points out quite clearly that all activities, all values and interests will remain in a secure position for a person who believes in the ultimate truth of śūnyatā. It is the other way round for one who does not subscribe to śūnyatā; nothing will be safe and secure for him. "Prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ, Prabhavati na tasya kincinna prabhavati śūnyatā yasya." (3) Here Nāgārjuna points out in his own commentary as follows: "Yasya hi śūnyatā prabhavati tasya pratītya samutpādaḥ prabhavati. Yasya Pratītyasamutpādaḥ prabhavati tasya catvāri āryasatyāni prabhavanti. Yasya catvāri ārya satyāni prabhavanti tasya śramaṇya phalāni prabhavanti, sarva viśeṣādhigamāḥ prabhavanti. Yasya sarva

viśeṣādhigamāḥ prabhavanti tasya trīṇī ratnāni-Buddha dharma sanghaḥ prabhavanti. Yasya pratītya samutpādaḥ prabhavanti tasya dharmo dharmahetuḥ dharmaphalaṃ ca prabhavanti, tasya adharmo adharmahetuḥ adharma phalaṃ ca prabhavanti etc. etc." The idea is that by a proper grasp-ing of śūnyatā, pratitya samutpāda on which the entire Bud-dhist moral discipline is founded, is also grasped properly. And if pratītya samutpāda is vindicated, the four noble truths, which constitute the entire bedrock of moral and spiritual disciplines, will stand vindicated. To the enlightened person who understands śūnyatā properly, therefore, the tri ratna (the triple jewel), the Buddha, the Law and the monastic order, will automatically become a matter of conviction. One who understands śūnyatā which is the same as Pratītya samutpāda therefore will believe in the truth of dharma, its cause and its effect, and he will also believe in adharma, its cause and effects etc. etc. According to Nāgārjuna therefore not only our moral discipline and spiritual practices get their justification and explanation from śūnyatā, our mundane laws of individual conduct, social behaviour etc. would also get their justification and explanation; all of these would find their meaning and derive their significance from śūnyatā or Pratītya samutpāda. On the other hand, one who does not subscribe to śūnyatā or essencelessness but believes in svabhāva or immutable essences would be compelled to give up the spiritual or moral practices as futile, for in that case everything would be believed to be having an eternal and intrinsic character of its own and being undetermined by causes and conditions would be supposed to remain un-changed. What would be the use of ethics or morality in a world having fixed essences everywhere which can never be changed this way or that? So Nāgārjuna clearly states that if

these good and bad acts and states are believed to be having an intrinsic reality and nature undetermined by causes and conditions, this will end in the futility of the observance of moral discipline for holy life. In that case, there would be no vice, no virtue, not even the conventional activities on the individual or the social plane, for things would be eternal having intrinsic reality of their own without being determined by causes and conditions. The 54th and the 55th stanzas of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* are extremely significant and noteworthy in this connection: "Atha na pratītya kincit svabhāva utpadyate sa kuśalānāṃ, dharmāṇāmevaṃ syād vāso na brahmacaryasya," and "Nādharmo dharmo vā saṁvyavahārāśca laukikā na syuḥ; nityāśca satsvabhāvāḥ syurnitya tvādahetumataḥ." All our spiritual, moral disciplines, dharma and adharma, all our mundane activities would become meaningless in a world where everything has an eternal and intrinsic character and they become meaningful only when we admit that they are pratītyasamutpanna, i.e. determined by causes and conditions, mutually interdependent and are therefore śūnya, i.e. niḥsvabhāva or essenceless.

Looked at from this perspective, it becomes astonishing indeed when some scholars, taking śūnya in its literal sense, raise the objection that if everything is void or empty, what would happen to moral discipline, spiritual path etc. without which Buddhism no longer remains Buddhist. Where is the scope, they ask, for ethics and religion in a doctrine of void? For my part, I would regard it as the case of a person "raising the dust and then complaining that he cannot see". Harsh Narain goes to the extent of condemning the entire Indian thought for its inability to reconcile the empirical with the ultimate, apart from condemning the Mādhyamika nihilism which should have no room left for religious fervour. "If all is void, how can this fervour (i.e. religious fervour) be

explained?," asks Harsh Narain. His answer is that as the Advaitin, "who claims not only substantiality but veritable identity with the Absolute and declares the world to be illusory," "does not lag behind others in his devotion to gods and goddesses," so also it is with the Mādhyamika. What he wants to maintain is that there is an irresolvable inconsistency here, which alas, according to him, is an intrinsic feature of the Indian mind. "While contemplating the ultimate truth, the Mādhyamika is led to consider everything as illusory and void and goes to the extent of declaring the Tathāgata himself, the supreme object of his devotion, to be nothing better than void. But, while contemplating the immediate/empirical truth, he distinguishes between his gods and their devotees and behaves as if he were as much of a realist as others. Indeed, Indians have seldom been able to reconcile the empirical with the ultimate, and one need not be surprised if the Mādhyamika fares no better." (4) The entire approach of Harsh Narain in this context to vyavahāra and paramārtha distinction as envisaged in the Indian mind, whether it is in the case of the Advaita or the Mādhyamika, seems to me to be misguided, to say the least and it is indeed deplorable that the whole of Indian thought be condemned for creating an unbridgeable hiatus, so to say, between the vyavahāra and paramārtha on account of a simple lack of proper understanding of the subject at hand. I cannot go into the details regarding Advaita here, because that would be outside my purview, but here it would perhaps suffice to point out that the distinction between vyavahāra and paramārtha in Advaita refers to two different perspectives, one of which is empirical and the other one is supposed to be the ultimate which by no means comes to a clash with the empirical but makes sufficient room for it in its own plane. It will be clear

from the significant statement of Vidyāraṇya in *Pancadaśī* to the effect that Brahmajñānī or one who knows Brahman is like a person who is conversant with two languages, one, the language of the empirical and the other, the language of the wise. "Dvibhāṣābhijñavad vidyādubhau laukika vaidikau." (5) In any case, vyavahāra is not ruled out altogether, but is accepted only on the vyāvahārika or empirical plane. What further reconciliation is being expected by the learned scholar here is beyond my comprehension. Are the empirical and the ultimate meant to be *somehow* amalgamated at a particular stage? But why should they? There is no amalgamation, of course, for they are not meant to be so amalgamated. Does the critic have something like a Bradleyan Absolute in his mind as a model? But here there is no such Bradleyan Absolute of course! I fail to understand what exactly is in the mind of the learned scholar when he demands a reconciliation of the empirical with the ultimate. Once the ultimate is realized as the ultimate, our empirical life in its entirety becomes meaningful only in that light; there is a change in the whole outlook, in the perspective, that is all. He becomes a *jīvanmukta*, acting spontaneously for the benefit of mankind that is subjected to suffering on account of ignorance binding him to the empirical as ultimately real. "Śāntā mahānto nivasanti santo vasanta-vallokahitaṃ carantaḥ," as Śaṅkara points out in his *Viveka cūḍāmaṇi*. The jīvanmukta acts for the good of others spontaneously like the spring season. Reconciliation in a crude sense between pāramarthika and vyāvaharika does not make sense here. What is required is a transformation in the outlook, in our understanding, that is all.

Taking Mādhyamika philosophy into consideration, as has been already pointed out, it is not voidism or nihilism in its literal sense, but it only points to the essencelessness of

concepts and things (niḥsvabhāvatā). It has also been pointed out how the moral and spiritual disciplines derive their meaning only if one subscribes to śūnyatā in the sense of niḥsvabhāvatā which is the same as Pratītya samutpāda. Religious fervour is not only not irreconcilable in this context but it comes automatically to him to the extent it is necessary for our practical life along with moral disciplines in the plane of loksamvṛti satya. True, Triratna, Buddha, dharma and sangha, may have little relevance, rather may be out of place, in a nihilistic framework where void is the last word, but they cannot be ruled out in the framework of śūnyatā which is the same as niḥsvabhāvatā having its moorings in pratītya samutpāda taught by the Buddha himself. There is therefore no question of forcing a reconciliation between the empirical and the ultimate here, simply because the empirical derives its significance in the light of the ultimate and the ultimate in its turn can be taught only with the help of the empirical, where, it should be noted, there is a difference in the perspectives only. The religious fervour and the manner in which moral disciplines are inculcated, apparently followed and practised are of course not the same in the case of an ignorant person and the wise one who has been enlightened through prajñāpāramitā, being entrenched firmly in the truth of śūnyatā, for in the case of the former it is merely outward discipline accompanied by a lot of undue showmanship as a man of religion whereas in the case of the latter it leads to the Bodhicitta of Bodhisattva where mahākaruṇā necessarily follows the realization of Śūnyatā and becomes the deciding factor.

Here again, it is because of gross misunderstanding only that even benevolence is ruled out by some scholars of eminence from the purview of Mādhyamika Śūnyatā. Thus a

scholar of the stature of Ninian Smart seems to find an insuperable problem in reconciling Śūnyatā with benevolence, simply because, śūnyatā for him is nothing but void in the literal sense. "The emptiness of individuality," says Ninian Smart in one of his recent works, "is disturbing." "From this perspective the Buddhist teaching is disappointing. How can you really have loving benevolence for empty beings?"(6) This criticism by Ninian Smart of Buddhist thesis in general is applicable to Mādhyamika thought in particular with greater force, of course, because of the misunderstanding prevalent in the popular mind and in the mind of some scholars that śūnyatā is nothing but void. But what is this void, and what exactly does emptiness really mean in this context? Pratītyasamutpāda is not denied here after all, but it is only identified with śūnyatā in the sense of *niḥsvabhāvatā*, that is all. Concepts and things have no permanent, no intrinsic essences, of course, but their mutual interdependence is not denied. The question, and a crucial one for that, is whether knowledge of śūnyatā as a fact must necessarily lead to inaction and complete passivity. After extricating oneself from the delusion of permanence, after realizing everything to be essenceless or śūnya in this sense, is there anything left for a man to perform by way of action? True, he is no longer under the spell of those all-pervasive addictions and seductions which hold the ordinary mortals in thraldom. But what then is he expected to do? Will he be a mere passive spectator, so to say, of the human misery, misery of the fellow-human beings who suffer immeasurably on account of those very delusions from which he has extricated himself through a careful analysis of the state-of-affairs as it obtains? Even if there is no permanent fixed essence any where, when the wise man who has realized this truth of śūnyatā finds that

people all around him are subjected to the delusion of permanence and cling to it, it becomes very natural, very normal, on his part to be moved by great compassion for these deluded creatures. That is why Prajñākaramati points out that the enlightened person is spontaneously moved by Mahākaruṇā (7). Even Buddha's different teachings for disciples of different capacities are prompted by Mahākaruṇā like the treatment of patients by a medical man of great expertise, says Candrakīrti in *Prasannapadā* (8). It is significant that the Buddha is called 'Jagadbandhu' here.

This is worthy of note in view of the opposite view prevalent in the mind of some scholars like Ninian Smart as mentioned above, that one cannot have loving benevolence for 'empty beings'. The emptiness of beings, if at all such a term is permitted here, can only be in respect of permanent essences; it does not mean that the Mādhyamika does not or cannot take into account the poignance of individual suffering. Rather, it is just the opposite, because the wise man knows that he can eradicate the suffering of the ignorant by imparting the proper understanding of śūnyatā to the ignorant, through his deliberate efforts. And here lies the clue to the human welfare as well as world-peace which are mutually interwoven with each other. The very presence of one who gets rid of the all-pervasive delusions and addictions based on such delusions should be conducive to human welfare and world-peace. The question of his remaining as a mere spectator to all the ills of the world or simple passivity on his part leading to self-annihilation does not arise. The situation is rather the other way round. True human welfare and world-peace, to my mind, can be better understood in the background of mahākaruṇā of such rare souls who are not addicted to delusions of permanence or essence in any form including that of a permanent soul-substance.

There is little scope for rejoicing in a narrow self-centric life adhering to one's pet fads on the part of individuals or nations as a whole who would extricate themselves from the delusions of permanent self (ātman) or immutable essence (svabhāva) of things. It would be wrong to suppose that nirvāṇa, which is non-different from enlightenment or prajñā consisting in complete cessation of thought-constructions (9), is itself another covetable state in an essentialist sense (10). Since enlightenment gives rise to mahākaruṇā in the enlightened mind, human welfare and world-peace would follow only to the extent to which enlightenment is actualized and becomes a part and parcel of the lifestyle of mankind, particularly of the leaders of men, the world-leaders, who are in charge of the affairs of this little world of ours.

Is it possible that Mahākaruṇā itself may turn out to be another addiction? I do not think so, at least in so far as it has its basis in prajñā or enlightenment. Being an outcome of the realization of anattā and niḥsvabhāvatā, it cannot by any stretch of imagination be construed as an addiction, for it arises only when one extricates oneself from all delusions, and it would not be Mahākaruṇā if it were itself to be an addiction or a fad. Candrakīrti's reference to *Āryaratnakūṭa sūtra* issuing the following warning in respect of śūnyatā as a view or dṛṣṭi is instructive as well as illuminating, "If a drug administered to a patient were to remove all his disorders but were to foul the stomach itself by remaining inside, the patient in that case cannot be said to have been cured; this would rather cause greater affliction to him. Even so, śūnyatā is an antidote to all dogmatic views, but if a man were to cling to it for ever as a view in itself, I would call him incurable, said the Lord."(11) Śūnyatā is not meant to be adhered to as a piece of dogma. Taking a cue from this, we

may say that Mahākaruṇā in Bodhisattva is not a matter of fad either, and that is precisely the reason why the presence of Bodhisattva in a society can be conducive to human welfare and world-peace, provided of course the world at large allows itself to benefit from his presence.

Ninian Smart, a little later in his work, makes a significant point when he says, "Whether you have a permanent self or not is by the way; you are still an individual, who laughs and cries, has ambitions and sorrows. As a Buddhist you should laugh with another's laughs and cry with another's weeping."(12) It is alright so far as it goes of course; but it is not enough. The Mādhyamika Mahākaruṇā that follows from the realization of śūnyatā is not exhausted by merely laughing with another's laughs or by crying with another's weeping. It goes to the extent of the realization of a Bodhisattva who is prepared to sacrifice himself and even his nirvāṇa or enlightenment for the sake of the suffering humanity. The Bodhisattvayāna or the Bodhisattva path involves arousing the bodhicitta or thought of enlightenment, and the motivation here, it should be noted, is not merely egoistic but it is also altruistic; it is done not merely for the sake of one's own self but also on account of the compassion for all living beings. Then comes a set of vows or resolutions, praṇidhāna, as they are called, vows such as "when we have crossed the stream, may we help others also in this; when we are liberated, may we liberate others", or even self-sacrificing vows such as "May I not attain supreme, perfect enlightenment until such and such a benefit is assured to beings who are born in my Buddha-land."(13) Then there are six pāramitās or perfections, of course, dāna (giving), śīla (morality), kṣānti (patience), vīrya (vigour), dhyāna (meditation) and prajñā (wisdom), which need to be practised in the career of a

Bodhisattva. In the entire career and conduct of a Bodhisattva, Bodhisattvacaryā, altruistic motive seems to be ingrained through and through. The Bodhisattva concept is thus a unique one in Buddhism and it pervades as an Ideal, a Model, the conduct of the Mādhyamika thinker along with his śūnyatā philosophy. It is therefore somewhat binding on us here to dilate further on this concept of Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna, elaborated in works like the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* which, far from being incompatible with śūnyatā, seems to be a natural normal, outcome of the śūnyatā philosophy.

Buddha taught pratītyasamutpāda, that is śūnyatā which is the same as saddharma, for the eradication of all dogmatic views out of anukaṁpā, says Nāgārjuna in his closing stanza at the end in *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā* and bows down to him for this. "Sarva dṛṣṭi prahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmamadeśayat, Anukaṁpāmupādāya taṃ namasyāmi Gautamaṃ." And what is this anukaṁpā after all? It is nothing but Mahākaruṇā (great compassion), says Candrakīrti in his commentary. So the motivation for the teaching of the pratītya samutpāda, i.e. śūnyatā for eradication of all dogmatic views on the part of the Buddha lies not in mere logic-chopping or giving some intellectual delight to a few advanced disciples through subtlety of logic but it lies in Mahākaruṇā itself. In the words of Candrakīrti, "Yaḥ saddharmaṃ ... prapancopaśamaṃ śivaṃ pratītyasamutpāda samjñayā hi deśitavān sarva dṛṣṭiprahāṇārthaṃ jagatāmanukaṁpāmupādāya mahākaruṇāmevāśritya priyaikaputrādhikatarapremapātrasakalatribhuvanajanaḥ, na lābha satkāra pratyupakārādilipsayā." How this very mahākaruṇā prompts the entire conduct of the Bodhisattva (Bodhisattvacaryā), we will be discussing in the sequel in some detail.

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4. Harsh Narain, *The Mādhyamika Mind* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1997), p. 148.
5. Cf. *Pancadaśī*, XI. 130.
6. Ninian Smart, *Lights of the World, Buddha and Christ*, (Dharmaram Publications, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1997), p. 65.
7. Prajñākaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā*, 9th chapter on Prajñāpāramitā, "Yathābhūtadrśino Bodhisattvasya śattveṣu mahakaruṇā pravartate."
8. Cf. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 18.6. "Prajñopāyamahākaruṇā saṁbhārapuraḥsarairnirupamaireka jagadbandhubhirniravaśeṣakleśamahāvyādhi cikitsakair mahāvaidyarājabhūtair hīnamadhyotkṛṣṭa vineyajanānujighṛkṣayā hīnānāṃ vineyānāṃ akuśalakarmakāriṇāṃ akuśalādi nivartayituṃ Buddhairbhagavadbhiḥ kvacidātmetyapi prajñapitaṃ loke vyavasthāpitaṃ."
9. Cf. Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*, 25.3. "Nirvaśeṣa Kalpanākṣayarūpameva nirvāṇaṃ." Cf. also *Āryatathāgataguhyasūtra*, as quoted in *ibid.*, 25.24, "Tatra Tathāgato na kalpayati na vikalpayati, sarvakalpavikalpajālavāsanāprapancavigato hi śantamate Tathāgataḥ."
10. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, 25.24, "Tadime, bhagavan, mohapuruṣā ye svākhyāte dharmavinaye pravrajya tīrthikadṛṣṭau nipatitā nirvāṇaṃ bhāvataḥ paryeṣante, tadyathā tilebhyastailaṃ kṣīrāt sarpiḥ."
11. *Āryaratnakūṭa sutra*, as quoted in *ibid.*, 13.8, "Gāḍhataraṃ tasya puruṣasya glānyaṃ bhavet, yasya tad bhaiṣajyaṃ sarvadoṣānuccārya koṣṭhagataṃ na niḥsaret.' Bhagavān aha- 'Evameva, Kāśyapa sarvadṛṣṭikṛtānāṃ śūnyatā niḥsaraṇaṃ, yasya khalu punaḥ śunyataiva dṛṣṭiḥ tamahamacikitsyamiti vadāmi."
12. Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
13. Cf. Richard H. Robinson, Willand L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion* (Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1982), p. 76.

CHAPTER 5

The Bodhisattva Ideal and the Vedāntic Jīvanmukti: A Study in Comparison and Contrast

In this chapter, I propse to discuss the Bodhisattva ideal by comparing and contrasting it with the Jīvanmukti ideal of the Advaita Vedānta for highlighting some of its characteristic features. In order to appreciate the Bodhisattva ideal as it is reflected in works like *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śantideva *vis-à-vis* the Jīvanamukti ideal of the Advaita Vedānta, we will have to understand first of all the exact implications of *mukti* or freedom, as it is envisaged in the context of Indian thought in general, for all these ideals and ideologies become relevant and meaningful only in the context of the idea of human freedom or mukti for which our aspiration is obvious and is taken for granted in this framework.

By 'freedom' we usually mean freedom from some undesirable state, such as freedom from hunger, poverty, slavery, certain external coercion or compulsion of mind and the like. In the context of Indian thought, freedom is primarily taken to mean freedom from suffering or duḥkha arising out of ignorance or avidyā. Tattvajñāna or the knowledge of the truth is here regarded as a means for attaining freedom. Similarly, throughout the history of Indian thought, barring only certain exceptions, freedom has been regarded as an ideal or a covetable state to be attained either through action, devotion or knowledge. Freedom, as it is conceived in the Indian

context (mokṣa), is considered to be the highest puruṣārtha or goal of life.

First of all it is to be noted that freedom in Indian thought is not necessarily a state to be attained hereafter, nor is it a state of other-worldliness which is to be attained by negating the worldly life altogether. Again, in certain cases, knowledge or illumination (jñāna) instead of being merely a means of freedom is itself considered to be the goal for which everyone should aspire only for its own sake inasmuch as freedom is supposed to consist in illumination itself. This is true of both the Vedāntic and the Buddhist traditions in different ways, as illumination is viewed differently by them.

It has often been misunderstood that according to Śaṅkara, knowledge or illumination (jñāna) is a means to freedom. But it is more appropriate to say that freedom, according to Śaṅkara, is nothing but illumination (jñāna). "Śrutayo Brahmavidyānantaraṃ mokṣam darśayantyo madhye kāryāntaraṃ vārayanti," as Śaṇkara would say in his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras*, 1–1–4. It is true that at places Śaṅkara speaks of jñāna as a means to liberation, e.g. when he says "Niḥśreyasaphalaṃ tu Brahmavijñānaṃ" in his commentary on Brahma-Sutras, 1–1–1, or when he says "mokṣasādhanaṃ jñānaṃ" in *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī*. But in all such cases it is a mere concession to the popular way of expressing the idea, simply because the context in which such statements are made should never be lost sight of. In the *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* for example, jñāna as an instrument of freedom can only mean the bookish knowledge of Brahman or vākyārthajñāna obtained through śravana only which is to be firmly entrenched in the mind of the listener through manana and nididhyāsana, finally culminating in Brahmajñāna in the sense of Brahmāvagati or the full comprehension

of Brahman. And in the commentary on the first Sūtra, "Athāto Brahmajijñāsā" Śaṅkara, being primarily interested in showing the difference between the fruits of dharmajijñāsā and Brahma-jijñāsā, naturally talks of mokṣa or niḥśreyasa as the fruit of Brahma-jñāna just to contrast it with worldly prosperity (abhyudaya) which is the fruit of dharmajñana. As a matter of fact, however, there is nothing more to be aspired for beyond the comprehension of Brahma (Brahmajñaña) in Advaita Vedānta. Illumination or jñāna is freedom and it itself is bliss or ānanda. Where jñāna is used in Śaṅkara Vedānta as a mere means (pramāṇa) for the comprehension of Brahman (Brahmāvagati) as for example when Śaṅkara says "jñānena hi pramāṇena avagantuṃ iṣṭaṃ Brahma," there jñāna to my mind should be taken to mean a mere word-to-word, bookish understanding of Brahman from the Śāstra, i.e. Vākyād vākyārtha-jñāna. In that sense alone Brahmajñāna and Brahmāvagati can be distinguished from each other, for otherwise jñāna in the sense of aparokṣa-jñāna is certainly indistinguishable from avagati, and Brahmāvagati or jñāna in this context should mean an immediate and full comprehension of the nature of the real which constitutes the puruṣartha or the aim of man and is identical with freedom (mokṣa).

Regarding the nature of this illumination (freedom) and its impact on the day-to-day life of man and the society, we come across a variety of descriptions in the Indian philosophical literature. According to some, it is a state of delight where one forgets all worldly botherations and is lost in some sort of Divine contemplation; the worldly life is either forgotten altogether or is relegated to a secondary place in the life of a freeman (the mukta). But freeman, while alive, as he is conceived in Advaita Vedānta (Jīvanmukta), is certainly not a recluse or a hermit flying away from or shunning the worldly life. Illumination is considered to be

extremely relevant to the day-to-day existence of man and conduct in the society; it is in no way antagonistic to or incompatible with normal day-to-day life of man.

Some of the misconceptions associated with the idea of freedom (mukti) are subjected to trenchant criticism by Vidyāraṇya in *Pancadaśī.* Enlightenment does not make one unfit for worldly transactions, otherwise it would be a kind of illness, which of course it is not. Knowledge of truth is not something like the disease of consumption (1) which makes one incapable of normal dealings. The idea is that illumination does not affect our normal transctions in any way. There is no difference between the ignorant and the enlightened as regards their activity or abstention from activity from the point of view of the body, senses, mind and intellect. *Pancadaśī* is quite clear on the point that freedom does not consist in becoming like sticks and stones abstaining from food etc.; it takes a pragmatic view of the whole issue. The man who is attached to objects is troubled by the world; happiness is enjoyed by one who is not so attached. Therefore, if one wants to be happy, he should give up attachment, that is all.

While discussing the concept of freedom in Indian thought one should be careful in interpreting certain well-known statements of treatises like the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, e.g., 'Udāsīnavadāsīno' etc. As *Pancadaśī* has very aptly remarked, "Ajñātvā śāstrahṛdayaṃ mūḍho vaktyanyathānyathā," the foolish who does not understand the essence of the scriptures, expresses his opinions in varieties of ways. That the enlightened person is not forgetful about the world, that illumination does not destroy duality, that it makes one realize the self as real and the world as unreal only in a specific sense, is clear from the following passage of *Pancadaśī*,

"Ātmadhireva vidyeti vācyaṃ na dvaitavismṛtih." (2) Vidyāraṇya caricatures the idea that illumination consists in forgetfulness of the world of duality by pointing out that inanimate objects like pots should in that case be half-enlightened inasmuch as they do not have any knowledge of duality. *Pancadaśī* is rather very clear on the point that the knower of truth fulfils his worldly duties well, as they do not conflict with his knowledge. In order to perform worldly activities, according to *Pancadaśī*, it is not essential that the world should be taken as ultimately real.

The enlightened person is not a conjurer; he does not conjure anything out of existence, nor does he bring about anything into existence by his illumination or insight. In the words of Wittgenstein we may say, "Philosophy leaves everything as it is (3)." Things required for doing normal activities in the world are the means such as mind, speech, body and external objects, and these are not made to vanish by enlightenment. So why can the enlightened person not engage himself in worldly affairs? Therefore, as knowledge of truth does not affect the means, such as the mind etc., the enlightened person is able to do worldly activities such as ruling a country, study of logic or engaging in agriculture. The enlightened one, like an expert conversant with two languages, knows both the bliss of Brahman and the worldly joys and does not see any conflict between the two (4). The idea of freedom (mukti) as something mystical and other-worldly is thus entirely ruled out by *Pancadaśī*. It is as if someone has mastery over two different languages; as there is no incongruity here, similar is the case with one having illumination continuing to be conversant with the worldly affairs. This dispels once and for all the deep-rooted misconception about Indian philosophy that in freedom (mukti) one

is transferred as it were from the mundane existence to a supramundane plane of Reality so that the worldly awareness is gone for ever. Enlightenment consists in mastering a technique and this has no conflict with our normal awareness. What is important to note in this connection is that the enlightened person is not affected or disturbed by the pleasure or pain caused by prārabdha; thus and only in this sense he is a free man. The only difference between the enlightened person who is free and the unenlightened one who is in bondage is that the former remains undisturbed and patient through all his afflictions caused by prārabdha whereas the latter is impatient and suffers on account of this. This is how, and this is the sense in which, the metaphysical concept of freedom in Indian thought, instead of remaining confined to the conceptual level alone, is seen to have a definite bearing on our practical day-to-day life. Attainment of freedom (mukti) by no means makes one other-worldly or merely contemplative, transcending, and thereby being totally unfit for the day-to-day affairs of the world. Though undergoing similar experience or engaged in similar activities, it is freedom from misery that characterizes the enlightened person whereas the unenlightened one continues to be subject to misery (5).

As far as the ethical aspect of freedom is concerned, it is to be noted that the enlightened one is in a definitely advantageous position to do good to the society without any attachment whatsoever, and the life of a Jīvanmukta, though in itself beyond good and evil, can thus be conducive to the social welfare. In any case, there cannot be any question here of his life being one of unbridled licentiousness like that of a debauch. His life is a life of detachment alright, but at the same time the world can benefit immensely by his teaching.

As an Ācārya he can be a source of unfailing guidance as well as inspiration to erring humanity. That is why an enlightened person is described by Śaṅkara as both 'Vimuktasaṅga' and 'Sadāpāradayāṁbudhāma' (6). Ācārya Śaṅkara is very clear about the life and conduct of such men of wisdom, the enlightened ones. There are great souls, says Śaṇkara, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring (Vasantavallokahitaṃ carantaḥ) (7), and who having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any selfish motive whatsoever. Here the words 'Vasantavallokahitaṃ carantaḥ', doing good to the world like a spring, refer to the spontaneous goodness of the enlightened person. It is indeed a pity that this sponaneous goodness of the free man in the context of Indian thought has not been sufficiently highlighted, while the free man's (Jīvanmukta's) life has been depicted as one of sheer moral indifference and callousness by those who are alienated from Indian thought and culture in some way or the other.

The free man in the Buddhist tradition is also one who is free from attachment, free from strong likes and dislikes. "Granthiḥ teṣāṃ na vidyante yeṣāṃ nāsti priyāpriyaṃ," says the *Dhammapada*. "Tasmāt prājño na tāmichhet ichhato jāyate bhayaṃ," says the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Freedom is achieved through the realization of śūnyatā according to the Mādhyamikas. In *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā* it is explicitly pointed out that "Śūnyataiva nirvāṇakāraṇaṃ," "Śūnyataiva bodhimārga iti sthitaṃ." This is true of the entire Mādhyamika tradition, of course.

The asymmetry between the Vedāntic tradition of Jīvanmukta and the Buddhist tradition of Bodhisattva to which I would like to draw the attention of learned scholars is as

follows. Inequality is there everywhere, manifest on all sides to even a casual observer, and it is a matter of day-to-day experience, so to say. Equality comes with that enlightenment which makes one free. A wise man who is established in Brahman is also established in equanimity as well as equality. The wise (paṇdita) would look on a Brahmin endowed with learning and culture, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a pariah with an equal eye (samadarśin), says the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The mortal plane is conquered by those whose minds are established in equality (sāmya), for Brahman is free from blemish and there is equality everywhere, and the wise men are established in Brahman (8). *Aṣṭāvakra-Gītā* similarly speaks of a person having self-knowledge being equally disposed to all. "Sa dhanya ātmajñaḥ sarvabhāveṣu yaḥ samaḥ." Equality however is inculcated in a different way in the Buddhist treatises like *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, although here also it is a question of enlightenment. Here it is based on realizing the similarity of our pleasure-pain experiences. "When both myself and others are similar in that we wish to be happy and do not want to suffer in any way, what then is so special about me? Why should I strive for my happiness alone? Why should I protect myself and not others?" (9), asks Śāntideva. "I should dispel the misery of others because it is suffering just like my own, and I should benefit others because they are sentient beings just like myself (10). The realization of similarity leads to an altruistic form of life. There is no absolutistic ontology, no ontology of Brahman, involved here. The comprehension of śūnyatā alone leads to cessation of suffering here, "Śūnyatā duḥkhaśamanī" (11), but this śūnyatā which is emphasized is nothing but niḥsvabhāvatā and is not meant to be adhered to as a metaphysical doctrine (12). The argument advanced for viewing

others as equal is quite simple and straightforward. It is based on our ordinary, day-to-day experiences of sukha (pleasure) and duḥkha (pain), that is all. That is why in the 'Dhyānapāramitā' chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, we are asked first of all to make an effort to meditate upon the equality between self and others. We are asked to protect all beings as we do ourselves because we are all equal in wanting pleasure and not wanting pain (13). The sense of equality arising out of the deliberations upon our day-to-day experience of pleasure and pain make us concerned for others as we are concerned for ourselves. This typically empirical approach of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is thus asymmetrical insofar as it is not based on any absolutistic metaphysics of Advaitic Brahman as is the case with a Jīvanmukta.

Undoubtedly there is a remarkable affinity between Śaṅkara and the Mādhyamikas which cannot escape our notice. Both of them take the normal transactions of our day-to-day life as also the ordinary language to be sacrosanct in their own sphere (14). Not only this, they engage themselves in their respective philosophical enterprises only on the basis of and by the reshaping of the concepts available in ordinary discourse, as is evident from profuse reference to 'vyavahāra', 'loka', 'jana prasiddhi' and the like in their philosophy. Śaṅkara does this in case of concepts such as 'jñāna' (15), whereas Candrakīrti does the same with concepts such as 'svabhāva' (16). In view of and precisely because of such extrapolations from, and extraordinary and highly significant reformulation of familiar concepts and ideas deliberately brought about by what they regard as the inherent logic of these concepts, along with the specific arguments through which the conclusion is arrived at, these enterprises are to be considered as typical examples of genuine philosophical activity (17), even

if they are both averse to speculative metaphysics in some form or the other. The difference, however, is no less conspicuous. For a proper appreciation of this difference, it is necessary that we must deal here in some detail with Śaṅkara's analysis of avidyā or adhyāsa (ignorance) whose eradication alone would lead to Brahmāvagati or illumination in Śaṅkara Vedānta which constitutes mokṣa or freedom.

Avidyā or adhyāsa, according to Śaṅkara, is 'atasmin tadbuddhiḥ', i.e. to have the idea of something in something else. In the present context it would signify the idea of the self being confused with the idea of the object and that of the object being confused with the self. For Śaṅkara the lokavyavahāra, i.e. the normal transaction which is based on adhyāsa, is expressed in language through such expressions as 'I am this', ahaṃ idaṃ and 'this is mine', mama idaṃ etc. Is avidyā a mere linguistic error or confusion? There is some such implication to be found in the writings of some recent-day thinkers for whom linguistic analysis is the be-all and the end-all in Śaṅkara's philosophy (18). Adhyāsa or avidyā for them is nothing but linguistic confusion and consequently Brahmajñāna is reduced to nothing but linguistic illumination through linguistic analysis. To my mind it appears that such interpretations of Śaṅkara Vedānta with all their ingenuity and insight miserably suffer from what I would regard as the fallacy of reductionism.

The issue is ontological, not merely linguistic. It is the all-pervasive and deep-rooted ignorance of the non-dual reality in Śaṅkara Vedānta which is at the basis of our ordinary transactions expressed in the form of linguistic expressions such as 'I am this' and 'This is mine'. The entire confusion expressed in the form of our ordinary language is based on a deep-rooted ignorance which is regarded as beginningless

(anādi), endless (ananta) and natural (naisargika). Confusion such as a man considering himself hale and hearty or the contrary so long as his wife and children etc. are hale and hearty or otherwise, or a man taking himself to be stout, lean, fair, mute, deaf or blind etc. are all expressions of a deep-rooted ignorance or avidyā in Śaṅkara Vedānta. Not only this, all transactions of man as an agent or an enjoyer are based on this ignorance. It is true that ordinary language reflects this ignorance but this is only in case of those who take ordinary language to be revealing the nature of ultimate reality, that is to say so far as ordinary language is taken to be something more than vyāvahārika. An enlightened person may use the same language knowing fully well that this is of mere practical value and all the while he is never misled by the distinctions expressed in the form of ordinary language. Language, therefore, does not necessarily create the illusion of which Śaṅkara speaks, nor is it a fact that the confusion here is merely verbal. Ignorance consists in seeing distinction where in reality there is none. Distinction-less non-dual reality has an ontic status in Advaita Vedānta and the error originating from distinctions should therefore be an ontological one, expressed in the form of our behaviour, normal transactions, and in ordinary language. In this context it would be worthwhile to remember that vidyā in Śaṅkara, is 'vastusvarūpāvadhāraṇa' or the ascertainment of the nature of Reality, not mere linguistic illumination.

Analysis is a means to eradicate this error. But unless the Advaita is realized through such analysis, mere linguistic clarification is not enough. It is, therefore, essential to make a distinction between mere understanding of the linguistic forms through analysis on the one hand, and the eradication of ignorance and consequent realization of Advaita which is

effected through analysis on the other. What exactly is the difference between the understanding of different forms of language and the understanding that eradicates avidyā through analysis? This will be clear from the word 'adhyavasāna' which is used by Śaṅkara immediately following the words 'vākyārtha vicāraṇa' in his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* 1.1.2. Vācaspati Miśra has very rightly explained 'adhyavasāna' as 'savāsanā avidyādvayochheda', i.e. the eradication of two types of ignorance along with their tendencies. Ignorance manifests in our ordinary language and in our normal transactions not only when we regard a person as ignorant in the ordinary sense (Tūlāvīdyā) but also when he has the deep-rooted ignorance (Mūlāvīdyā). Both these kinds of ignorance are reflected in ordinary language and need to be eradicated through analysis. Then only will there be Brahmāvagati, which of course is puruṣārtha. If this point is lost sight of, as it has been in case of those who regard linguistic illumination to be the be-all and end-all in Śaṅkara Vedānta, how is one going to explain Śaṅkara's condemnation in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* of a vidvān, who is learned in Vedānta, or is Vedānta nayānta darśī as Śaṅkara would call him? When Śaṅkara speaks of viduṣaḥ sarvapravṛttyasaṁbandhaḥ in his commentary on *Brahma Sūtras*, 1.1.4, the same word, vidvān, has been used also to refer to *Brahmajñānī* whose ignorance has been removed. To my mind it is very important to draw a distinction between these two types of vidvān as envisaged in Śaṅkara's literature.

The point which I want to make is that mere understanding of the logic of language, in the sense of clarifying the distinctions between subject and predicate or distinguishing between various types of discourses like prescriptive, descriptive or referring, is not the same as Brahmajñāna.

Knowledge of these distinctions is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Śaṅkara explicitly points out that even if one is intelligent, scholarly, and full of insight into the most subtle meanings of the śāstras, still on being enveloped by tamas he regards the unreal to be the reality (19). Here again the implication is that knowledge of subtle distinctions of meaning is not enough. Moreover, one fails to understand how on the radically linguistic version of Advaita Vedānta one would explain Śaṅkara's statement that the knower of the six systems of philosophy including Vedānta is not fit for liberation whereas one who is free from the bondage of attachment towards objects alone is fit for the same (20).

The impression that is given by these recent-day linguistic interpreters (21) is that Śaṅkara was concerned only with linguistic analysis. They even go to the extent of asserting that the Advaitin was talking of various structures of language and that his aim was to reveal the depth structure which is the eternal structure in contrast with the surface structure. "Brahma Satyaṃ jagatmithyā," these well-known expressions ascribed to Śaṅkara are interpreted to mean that the logical subject is eternal and incorrigible whereas the logical predicate is corrigible. Moreover, the well-known criterion of Reality put forward by Śaṅkara in *Gītā Bhāṣya*, viz., "yad viṣayā buddhiḥ na vyabhicarati tat sat" is taken to refer to an idea, not to the Reality, the interpretation given being, "that idea in our discourse which is not capable of change is that eternal or *Sat.*" (22) But in fact Śaṅkara here is speaking of the criterion of Reality (yad viṣayā buddhiḥ), not of mere idea in our discourse, nor is there any justification for reducing the distinction between Brahman and jagat to a distinction of the logical subject and the logical predicate. Certainly Brahman of Śaṅkara was not meant to be

identified with a mere logical subject. Logical subject has only a specific and restricted use in its tradition. My point is that there is a peculiar ontic reference in Śaṅkara which cannot be eliminated, and this ontic reference cannot be adequately brought out by pointing out the role of logical subject in language. Such exclusive talks of logical subject–predicate distinctions in Advaita would not only involve the fallacy of reductionism but it would also amount to a sort of philosophical anachronism. No doubt Śaṅkara does advocate some sort of illumination through analysis, but here analysis is to be taken as the analysis of akhaṇḍārthaka vākyas insofar as it is conducive to the eradication of avidyā resulting in illumination with regard to the nature of ultimate reality, not a mere linguistic illumination. Ignorance or avidyā is pervasive and deep-rooted and language reflects this ignorance; analysis of language becomes necessary for eradication of ignorance. But what is important is that ignorance about the nature of reality be eradicated and illumination regarding the nature of the same be obtained, not illumination about linguistic form alone—which would constitute mokṣa or liberation according to Śaṅkara.

Although it is true that Śaṅkara as well as the Mādhyamika thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti advocate in some sense the idea of illumination through analysis, it is significant to note that they are very much different in their conception of both analysis and illumination. When there is some sort of absolutistic ontology embedded in the very structure of Śaṅkara's philosophical enterprise, Mādhyamika thinkers take sufficient care to avoid any such ontology to the extent that they are mistaken as nihilists which of course they are not. A remarkable anxiety on the part of Mādhyamika thinkers on the other hand to see that their philosophical activity

should not be misconstrued as nihilism either is visible even to a casual reader of their literature. Nāgārjuna's words of caution in this context are quite significant. "Just as a snake caught in a wrong manner by an idiot," says Nāgārjuna, "only causes death to him or as a magic wrongly employed destroys the magician, so also Śūnyatā wrongly apprehended only ruins the person concerned." "Vināśayati durdṛṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasaṃ, sarpo yathā durgṛhīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā." (23) Mādhyamika thinking presents to us a model of philosophical analysis resulting in an enlightenment regarding the nature of concepts as also things as essenceless (niḥsvabhāva). The difference with regard to ontology as mentioned above in the case of Śaṅkara and the Mādhyamikas is at the root of all other important differences in enlightenment etc. The illumination of Prajñā is quite different from that of Brahmānubhava or Brahmajñāna and correspondingly the difference between nirvāṇa and mokṣa is no less conspicuous. The method of analysis adopted by both also does not follow the same line. Analysis in one case is applied to Vedānta statements (vākyārtha vicāraṇa) for the realization of advaita which alone is the reality *vis-à-vis* dvaita or duality which is mere appearance, while in the other case it is applied to concepts for the realization of essencelessness of concepts as also things (Vastutattvapravicaya) (24), beyond which there is no other reality left to be realized.

Moreover, there is a positive emphasis in the Bodhisattva tradition on the alleviation of the suffering of others even at the cost of one's personal comfort. Karuṇā is the deciding factor here. "Karuṇāparatantratayā paraduḥkhaduḥkhinaḥ sarvaduḥkhāpaharaṇāya yatnaḥ," says Prajñākaramati (25). If by one person's suffering the suffering of many would be destroyed, surely kind-hearted people would accept it for the

sake of themselves and others. In this context the example of Bodhisattva Supuṣpacandra, who sacrificed himself and allowed himself to be harmed by the king for the eradication of the misery of many is cited by Śāntideva (26). Hence an altruistic temper permeates the conduct of Bodhisattva, which to all outward appearances may be similar to the spontaneous goodness of a Jīvanmukta. What is important to note here is that even mokṣa or liberation for one's own self is not valued for its own sake by the Bodhisattva. Freedom of the Bodhisattva is primarily altruistic, not self-centric. There being Parārthaikāntatṛṣṇā or the longing to do good to others, one does not care for one's own liberation, and there can be no question of indulging in self-conceit or wonder on account of this either. "Ataḥ parārthaṃ kṛtvāpi na mado na ca vismayaḥ." (27) Doing good to others is spontaneous on the part of the Bodhisattva as it is in the case of a Jīvanmukta. In this sense there is similarity in these two conceptions no doubt, but there is also asymmetry insofar as there is a goal of freedom for mankind as a whole in one case, whereas there is an emphasis on the achievement of one's own freedom in the other. Both Jīvanmukta and Bodhisattva would work undoubtedly for the benefit of mankind as a whole. Bhodhisattva has no metaphysical axe to grind, however, nor is he interested in his own freedom so much as he is interested in the freedom of mankind.

Śāntideva's following remarks need a special mention in this connection as they are very significant and illuminating. "Will not the ocean of joy that would be there when all become free," asks Śāntideva, "be sufficient for me? What am I to do with my liberation alone?" "Mucyamāneṣu sattveṣu ye te prāmodyasāgaraḥ, Taireva nanu paryāptaṃ mokṣeṇārasikena kiṃ." (28) The altruistic element is thus

fully explicit in the Bodhisattva ideal, though at the same time it cannot be said to be entirely absent in the ideal of the Jīvanmukta, for altruism is ingrained in some form or the other in both of them. What makes all the difference, however, is that mokṣa is denounced in favour of an altruistic form of life in the Bodhisattva ideal which is further devoid of any commitment to the absolutistic ontology of Brahman. All this needs to be pointed out over and over again even at the risk of repetition because the tendency to mix them up has been equally strong.

Inspite of all that has been said and done to reduce nirguṇa Brahman to śūnya in certain quarters, śūnyatā, I am afraid, cannot be regarded as a substitute for Brahman in the Buddhist context. The asymmetry, therefore, in both these traditions regarding their ideas of enlightenment, freedom and equality, needs special mention alongside similarities in view of the persistent tendency to undermine this typical asymmetry in favour of some imaginary identity in the minds of those who would put Buddhism and Vedānta in one single basket for all practical as well as theoretical purposes.

REFERENCES

1. Cf. *Pancadaśī*, VI, 271, "Tattvabodhaṃ kṣayaṃ vyādhiṃ manyante ye mahādhiyaḥ, teṣāṃ prajñātiviśadā kiṃ teṣāṃ duhśakaṃ vada."
2. *Pancadaśī*, VII, 186.
3. *Philosophical Investigations*, 124.
4. Cf. *Pancadaśī*, XI, 130, "Bhuñjāno viṣayānandaṃ Brahmānandaṃ ca tattvavit, Dvibhāṣābhijñavad vidyādubhau laukika vaidikau."
5. Cf. *Pancadaśī*, VII, 169, "Samēpi bhoge vyasanaṃ bhrānto gatchhenna buddhavān."
6. *Viveka-cūḍāmaṇi*, 486.
7. *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, 12.4, "Sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ."

8. Cf. *Bhagavadgītā*, 5.18 and 19. Cf. also *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya*, "Samaṃ ekaṃ avikriyaṃ Brahma draṣṭuṃ śīlam yeṣām te paṇḍitāḥ samadarśinaḥ" (5.18) and "Yeṣaṁ sāmye sarvabhūteṣu Brahmaṇi samabhāve sthitaṃ niścalībhūtaṃ manaḥ antaḥkaraṇaṃ' (5.19).
9. Cf. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatara*, 8.95 and 96.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.94.
'Mayānyaduḥkhaṃ hantavyaṃ duhkhatvād ātmaduḥkhavat/ Anugrāhyā mayā'nye' pi sattvatvād ātmasattvavat."
11. *Ibid.*, 9.56.
12. Cf. Prajñākaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā*, 9.34. "Śūnyatāyāṃ api nābhiniveśah kartavyah."
13. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.90.
"Parātmasamatāṃ ādau bhāvayedevaṃ ādarāt/ Samaduḥkhasukhaḥ sarve pālanīyā mayātmavat."
14. Cf. Śaṅkara's commentary on *Brahma Sūtras*, II.2.10, "Vyavahāre tu yatra yathā dṛṣtastāpyatāpakabhāva statra tathaiva sa." Also Candrakīrti's commentary on Kārikā 18.7 quoting the words of Buddha, "Loko mayā sārdhaṃ vivadati. Nāhaṃ lokena sārdhaṃ vivadāmi. Yallokēsti sammataṃ, tanmamāpyasti sammataṃ. Yalloke nāsti sammataṃ, mamāpi tannāsti sammataṃ."
15. Cf. the typical logic of 'Jñāna' developed by Śaṅkara in his *Commentary on Brahma Sūtra* II.1.11,
"Samyagjñānānmokṣa iti sarveṣāṃmokṣavādināmabhyupagamaḥ. Tacca samyagjñānamekarūpam; vastutantratvāt. Ekarūpeṇa hyavsthito yōrthaḥ sa paramārthaḥ, loke tadviṣayaṃ jñānaṃ samyagjñānamityucyate yathāgniruṣṇa iti. Tatraivaṃ sati samyagjñāne puruṣāṇāṃ vipratipattiranupapannā. Ataḥ siddhamasyaivopaniṣadasya jñānasya samyagjñānatvaṃ. Atōnyatra samyagjṇānatvānupapatteḥ samsārāvimokṣa eva prasajyeta."
16. Cf. the typical logic of 'svabhāva' developed by Candrakīrti in his *Prasannapadā*, Fifteenth prakarana, "Nanu ca gopālāṅganājana-prasiddhametad agnerauṣṇyaṃ svabhāvamiti. Kiṁ Khalu asmābhiruktaṃ na prasiddha miti! Etattu vayaṃ brūma-Nāyaṃ svabhāva bhavitumarhati, svabhāva lakṣaṇa viyuktatvāt."
Cf. also *ibid.*, "Yaḥ kṛtakaḥ padārthaḥ sa loke naiva svabhāva iti vyapadiśyate, tad yathā, apāmauṣṇyaṃ, Yadetadauṣṇyaṃ tadapyagneḥ svabhāva na bhavatīti gṛhyatāṃ Kṛtakatvāt."
17. Cf. R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford, 1984) p. 4, "A philosopher's seriousness is judged by the quality of his arguments."

Cf. also p. 645 "... the material of the philosopher is ideas, questions, tensions, concepts. He molds and shapes these, develops, revises, and reformulates them, and places them in various relations and juxtapositions. In the medium of ideas, he sculptures a view."

18. Cf. G. Misra, *Analytical Studies in Indian Philosophical Problems* (Bhubaneswar, 1971) and *The Advaita Conception of Philosophy: Its Method, Scope and Limits.*
19. Cf. *Viveka Cūdāmaṇi,* "Prajñāvānapi panditōpi caturōpyatyantasūkṣmārthadṛk, vyāliḍhastamasā na vetti vahudhā saṃbodhitōpi sphuṭaṃ."
20. Cf. *Ibid.* "Viṣayāśā mohapāśādyo vimuktaḥ sudustyajāt, Sa eva kalpate muktyai nānyaḥ saṭśāstravedyapi."
21. Cf. G. Misra, *The Advaita Conception of Philosophy: Its Method, Scope and Limits.*
22. *Ibid.,* p. 18.
23. *Mūla Madhyama Kārikā* 24.11. Cf. Candrakīrti's Commentary on this Kārikā, "Yadi tāvat sarvamidaṃ śūnyaṃ, sarvaṃ nāstīti parikalpayet, tadasya mithyādṛṣṭirāpadyate. ... Evaṃ tāvadabhavena gṛhyamāḥā śūnyatā grahītāraṃ vināśayati."
24. Cf. Prajñākaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā,* Chapter 9, "Prajñā yathāvasthita pratītyasamutpanna vastutattva pravicaya lakṣaṇā."
25. Prajñākaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatārapanjikā,* 8.106. Cf. also *Ibid.,* 9.1. "Yathābhūtadarśino Bodhisattvasya sattveṣu mahākaruṇā pravartate."
26. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8.106.
27. *Ibid.*, 8.109.
28. *Ibid.*, 8.108.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this treatise is that the Mādhyamika approach is neither nihilistic in the literal sense of the term 'nihilism', nor is it a form of absolutisitc metaphysics like the Advaita Vedānta. Nāgārjuna cannot be condemned as a mere wrangler (vaitaṇḍika) either, having no thesis of his own, who is interested only in the refutation of the opponents' theses. Victory over the opponents at all costs is not what the Mādhyamikas would want to achieve. True, they don't have a metaphysical thesis of their own but they have their *summum bonum* or the highest good in nirvāṇa like any other Buddhist thinker and this nirvāṇa consists in the cessation of all metaphysical/essentialist thought-constructions (sarva kalpanā kṣayarūpa). As a matter of fact, it is attained only in prajñāpāramitā or the highest wisdom which consists in a critical insight into the exact nature of concepts and things as they really are. And this exact nature is nothing but śūnyatā, i.e. niḥsvabhāvatā or essencelessnes. This is the paramārtha satya as distinguished from the loka saṁvṛtisatya in the Mādhyamika framework. It is said to be the highest or the ultimate (parama) truth in the sense that it is the best (uttama) to be realized. The proper understanding or comprehension of 'śūnyatā' as the highest good or 'nirvāṇa' is the message conveyed by the Buddha to the suffering multitude, according to Nāgārjuna. It is described, therefore, as "Sarvopalaṁbhopaśamaḥ prapancopaśamaḥ śivaḥ." Being a state of the inapplicability of varieties of thought-

constructions, it is quiescence and it is also śiva or the highest good, says Candrakīrti, as it consists in the cessation of the speculative mind and the prolific linguistic habits thereof or because it puts an end to all kleśas, i.e. defiling forces, and all vāsanās or essentialist impulses. All these show that Mādhyamika philosophy does point to a *summum bonum* which consists in the realization of what it regards as 'paramārtha satya' as distinguished from 'lokasaṁvṛti satya'.

Nāgārjuna's intention in examining and denouncing one concept after another was to carry on a systematic criticism of human thought demonstrating the impossibility of metaphysical speculations. Language, however, is never condemned as a form of expression meant for practical purposes; this is what is known as 'loka saṁvṛti satya'. Language, when it is stretched beyond its legitimate limit and a strain is put on it from metaphysical and speculative angles as well as from a dogmatic standpoint, simply breaks down and it can no longer do its normal function. The categories of thought, when taken in an absolute sense, cannot stand the scrutiny of philosophical analysis although they may be alright from the practical standpoint.

Tattva, it may be noted here, does not refer to any transcendent reality; it simply means the true or the real nature of our ordinary discourse as also of things. This is hidden by the conventional use of language. Saṁvṛti is the same as ignorance which covers on all sides the true significance of our categories of understanding. In the words of Candrakīrti, "Ajñānaṃ hi samantāt sarvapadārthatattvāvachhādanāt saṁvṛtirityucyate."

Language misleads us and creates a false picture in our minds of there being a fixed essence or svabhāva of everything to which the concept is applied. Svabhāva, according

to Candrakīrti, is what is unchangeable, uncreated and permanent, and the assumption of such a 'svabhāva' in the 'dharmas' is what is vehemently criticized by the Mādhyamikas. When ignorance vanishes along with its consequent misleading picture of the essence of things, one realizes the tattva which is nothing other than śūnyatā or essencelessness. Nāgārjuna does not spare a single well-known concept; even the 'Tathāgata' does not escape his onslaught. Both Tathāgata and the world are devoid of svabhāva or essence, i.e. a fixed immutable and independent nature of their own. It does not mean, however, that everything is void literally. It is this thoroughgoing attack on essentialism of the Mādhyamikas which has been misconstrued as the doctrine of void or nihilism in a literal sense on the one hand while on the other hand, the Mādhyamika tattva, i.e. śūnyatā being devoid of all predication of 'is', 'is not', 'both' and 'neither' has been misunderstood as an Absolute Reality transcending thought categories, somewhat like the Brahman of Advaita Vedānta.

It is significant to note that one of the most eminent trendsetters of contemporary western philosophy has the following remarks to make, in another context, regarding philosophers' fads for 'essences'. "When philosophers use a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing," says Wittgenstein, "One must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?" (1) If "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (2) for Wittgenstein, here also there is a battle waged in another context by the Mādhyamikas against the essentialist thought-constructions on account of the philosophers' metaphysical bias; here our

linguistic usage itself is taken as misleading insofar as it is coloured by essentialist bias ingrained in our minds. Mādhyamika presents to us a unique philosophical activity that leads to prajñā, rather prajñāpāramitā, which is non-committal with regard to contending metaphysical/essentialist thought-constructions. This is the significance of tūṣṇīṁbhāva which is regarded as paramārtha (highest good) for the Āryas (enlightened ones) by Candrakīrti.

After extricating oneself from the essentialist delusion, after realizing everything to be essenceless or śūnya, one does not remain a mere spectator, so to say, of the human misery, misery of the fellow-human beings who suffer immeasurably on account of those very delusions from which the enlightened one has extricated himself through a careful analysis of the state of affairs as it obtains. As Prajñākaramati has rightly pointed out, *mahākaruṇa* becomes the natural outcome of enlightenment. Human welfare may be better understood in the background of this mahakaruṇā of such rare personalities who are not addicted to delusions of permanence or essence in any form including that of a permanent soul-substance. The concept of mahākaruṇā itself does not fit into any nihilistic interpretation of śūnyatā and absolutistic interpretation does not fit into the unique framework of the Mādhyamika enterprise where sarvadṛṣti prahāṇa (cessation of all essentialist/metaphysical thought-constructions) is taken as a model of philosophical illumination.

What I have given above is a short resumé of what has been done by me in this work. Both the theoretical and the practical implications of this much misunderstood philosophical enterprise have been worked out from different perspectives in the foregoing chapters. The findings

are there, for whatever they are worth, for the evaluation of the learned critics.

So far, however, I have assumed all along that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are not in any way different from each other in their approach; Candrakīrti on this view has only elaborated upon the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna. I have been concentrating on the reassessment of the exact nature of their philosophical activity, which has been wrongly supposed to be either nihilistic or absolutistic in accordance with our mental predilections. This task of reassessment is of seminal importance, from my point of view, as long-standing wrong notions prevailing about Mādhyamika thought make the entire enterprise purportless and of little consequence. There is, however, another problem that has been highlighted recently by scholars like Kalupahana which needs our serious attention.

Kalupahana in his *Mūlamadhyamaka kārikā of Nāgārjuna* (3) points out that while Nāgārjuna is true to Buddha and his teachings, Candrakīrti has more of Vedāntic leanings. "A more detailed study of both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti has convinced me," says Kalupahana, "that the former still remains faithful to the Buddha, while the latter has moved more towards a Vedāntic interpretation, thereby initiating a process that culminated in the disappearance of Buddhism as a distinct ideology from the Indian scene a few centuries later." (4) I consider this to be a serious, albeit a baseless, charge against Candrakīrti. For my part I don't find any reason to think that Candrakīrti is more Vedāntic and less Buddhist in his approach than Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are Mādhyamika thinkers in their own right and to that extent they can be properly regarded as being true to the central teachings of Buddha, without of course

entering into the controversy regarding the 'proper' understanding of Buddha's own teaching. What is most important in this context is to consider whether we have any reason to think that Candrakīrti has deviated from the Mādhyamika stand while commenting on the *Mūlamadhyama kārikā* of Nāgārjuna. And even if one is serious in making an attempt at bringing about a schism between Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti on the slightest pretext, I don't think such an attempt is likely to succeed, simply because it is a fact that Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* is one of the most brilliant expositions of the Mādhyamika thought contained in the *Mūlamadhyama kārikā*. And there is no justification for thinking that Candrakīrti has deviated from Nāgārjuna's main line of thought anywhere. Candrakīrti's statements like "Paramārtho hyāryāṇāṃ tūṣṇīṁbhāvaḥ" have been misinterpreted as referring to an Absolute smacking of the Vedāntic Brahman, no doubt, but as has been already pointed out by me earlier, Candrakīrti does not refer to any Absolute Reality or Brahman here but only to the non-committal of an enlightened person in face of the contending metaphysical theories. In view of this, I simply fail to understand why and how Kalupahana brings about the charge against Candrakīrti that he "favoured rather absolutistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna" (5) or that "he prefers a transcendentalist interpretation of Nāgārjuna." (6) Where is absolutism or transcendentalism here in the Vedāntic sense? I simply wonder. This is all the more strange in view of the fact that Kalupahana himself at more than one place in his work refers to Candrakīrti's "no-views" position (7). How in that case can his position be regarded as Vedāntic in the same breath at the same time? I wonder once again. Pratītyasamutpāda is śūnyatā and this itself is the middle position of "no views" in the sense of being non-committal to any

metaphysical essentialist thought-construction. It is therefore strange that Kalupahana finds something inconsistent in Candrakīrti advocating "no-views" and the doctrine of Pratītya samutpāda at the same time. "Candrakīrti," he points out in the context of Pratyaya-parīkṣā in chapter one of *Mūlamadhyama kārikā*, "inspite of his leanings towards 'no view' presents dependent arising as a position from which to criticize self-nature or self-existence (svabhāva)."(8) But where lies the incongruity here? Is it not Nāgārjunnian in its approach? This is the Mādhyamika position in any case, not to subscribe to any metaphysical position whatsoever. The fact, however, is that neither Nāgārjuna nor Candrakīrti is Vedāntic in any sense; they are both committed Mādhyamika Buddhist thinkers *par excellence.* There is no doubt resemblance between Vedānta and Mādhyamika thought, for example in the case of distinction between paramārtha satya and loka saṁvṛti satya of the Mādhyamikas and the Paramārtha and Vyāvahārika satya of the Vedānta, but in many cases such resemblances are, I am afraid, merely verbal and superficial. This issue has also been discussed by me in the previous chapters. I don't have anything more to add here to this, and I also don't find any reason to attribute more of Vedāntic leanings to Candrakīrti *vis-à-vis* Nāgārjuna. The charge, to say the least, is baseless.

Here it is also significant to note that in this work of mine I have tried to show how Mādhyamikas, with their śūnyatā philosophy, are not merely capable of accommodating, but are also really best suited for the demands of the ideal moral conduct and the religious life of a high order. Realization of śūnyatā not only leads to mahākaruṇa; it also makes us realize the true significance of four noble truths, the ārya satyas, through our day-to-day conduct. Ācārya Nāgārjuna's point

that all this comes easily to one for whom śūnyatā or essencelessness is the ultimate truth or paramārtha satya (9) is not only significant; it is also sufficient to eradicate once and for all our wrong notions about śūnyatā as sheer emptiness or void and further it is also sufficient to make us ever vigilant in respect of our philosophical activity, so that we do not turn śūnyatā itself to an absolutistic metaphysics either.

At the end, for further clarification of my stand, I would like to conclude with the following remarks. It is not tnat a Reality of an altogether different order hidden behind the appearance is grasped in Prajñā for the Mādhyamikas. It is our understanding which makes all the difference here. The world does not change in nirvāṇa; there is only a change in our understanding and the manipulation of the concepts. And that is why, Nāgārjuna points out in very clear terms, that there is not even the slightest difference between saṁsāra and nirvāṇa (10). Freedom from the bondage of essentialist thought-construction that is inculcated by the critical insight of śūnyatā, being non-different from Prajñā, could be conducive to peace both at the individual and world level only to the extent to which it is realized in the life of humanity at large. Much would depend, however, on a persistent training in and practice of Śūnyatā on a large scale, not only as a theoretical activity, but also as a form of life.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation,* 116.
2. *Ibid.*, 109.
3. Cf. David J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamaka kārikā of Nāgārjuna* (Delhi, 1991).

4. *Ibid.*, Preface.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 255
6. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
7. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 102, also p. 114.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
9. Cf. "Sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate."
10. Cf. *Mūlamadhyama kārikā*, 25.19 and 20, "Na saṁsārasya nirvāṇāt kincidasti viśeṣaṇaṃ, na nirvāṇasya saṁsārāt kindcidasti viśeṣaṇaṃ. Nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭih saṁsaraṇasya ca, na tayoḥ antaraṃ kincit susūkṣmampi vidyate."

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G.C. NAYAK, born at Cuttack (Orissa), India, studied at the Utkal, Allahabad, and Bristol (U.K.) Universities. He got his Ph.D. from Bristol University as a Commonwealth scholar in the year 1965. He was Professor and Head, Post Graduate Dept. of Philosophy of Utkal from 1978 to 1989. From 1989 to 1992 he was the Vice-Chancellor, Shri Jagannath Sanskrit Viswavidyalaya, Puri, Visiting Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Canada during 1995, Senior Fellow, ICPR during 1996–98, UGC Emeritus Fellow, Department of Philosophy and Religion, BHU, Varanasi during 1999–2000, also selected as a Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced study, Shimla in 2001.

Some of his important publications are *Evil, Karma, and Reincarnation* (1973), *Essays in Analytical Philosophy* (1978), *Philosophical Reflections* (1987), *Nehru and Indian Culture* (1990), *Evil and The Retributive Hypothesis* (1993), *Philosophical Enterprise and the Scientific Spirit* (1994) and *Understanding Religious Phenomenon* (1997).

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